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Diverse Experiences: Strategies of Display at Tate Modern

1. Introduction

In thinking about the pattern of displaying the Tate collection at Tate Modern, I propose to reflect a little upon the history of Tate over its longer existence. The institution celebrated its centenary shortly before announcing the conception of Tate Modern, which now has an eighteen-year history of its own.

Each museum has a distinct character that is formed through conscious decisions, but also shaped by chance opportunities and occurrences. History leaves its trace, although each acquisition, each addition, changes the nature of the whole; this happens very gradually, but cumulatively. And this character is manifest to the public most obviously through what is placed on display, and when and how that occurs.

Henry Tate's donation of his collection of British art in the 1890s had originally been administered as a 'younger sister', as it were, of the National Gallery. This tended to betray an air of reluctant acceptance of contemporary efforts by artists as yet untried by the 'test of time'. By and large, literature was valued over art in British culture, and visual arts were associated with France and often, it has to be said, viewed as suspiciously adventurous. Visiting in 1910, the American poet Marianne Moore described the Tate — then still a new institution — as 'beautifully placed, airy and very modern and not very interesting save for the Rossetts and the Wattses' [5, p. 116].

At that time, Marianne Moore might have seen Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism in London's commercial galleries, but these trends were yet to impinge on the national collection. It was only in 1925, that the Tate took official responsibility for contemporary international art not yet considered 'ready' for the National Gallery, adding this somewhat awkwardly to its remit to collect British art.

In the face of very limited funds, the collection attracted donations of works by Van Gogh and Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso, and others. These came through the support of the Contemporary Art Society and the generosity of collectors such as Hugh Lane, Samuel Courtauld, and Frank Stoop. There were also individual works, such as the gift from Winston Churchill's cousin, Lord Ivor Spencer Churchill, who bought two works by Bonnard (*The Window* and *The Bath*) in 1927 and presented them to the Tate three years later. Another American visitor, Alfred Barr, the founding director of the museum of Modern Art in New York described Tate's

‘magnificent rooms of Modern French painting’, an assessment that, it has to be admitted continues to surprise those of us who know what might have been.

It is a measure of the Tate’s steps towards modernism, that the first exhibition of an international artist was in 1927 and of the Swedish sculptor, Carl Milles. Drawing upon Classical and Nordic legends, Milles was at the height of his fame, but hardly a modernist; one critic praised him as recalling ‘the improvisers of the Baroque period’. The choice of his work seems a confirmation of the museum’s unwillingness to engage with new developments.

It is in marked contrast that, in 1930, Barbara Hepworth was asserting publicly that ‘a piece of sculpture can be purely abstract or non-representational’ [2, p. 29]. And in 1934, Jean Héliou expressed his concern, declaring that the new periodical *Axis*, to which he was contributing, was conceived ‘to help the movement of modern painting, ... [and] to encourage and criticize clearly the Tate Gallery’.

This situation was epitomised by the scandal that arose when customs officials questioned the importation of Constantin Brancusi’s works by the collector and gallery owner Peggy Guggenheim. When asked for advice, the then Tate Director, James Manson confirmed his reputation for conservative views by refusing to accept that they should be considered as works of art. Henry Moore was among those calling for Manson’s resignation.

The purpose of recalling such matters now, is to show the blind-spots that Tate had in its formative years in engaging with contemporary international art. This past can still carry lessons – both positive and negative – for us as an institution, not least because we do not deaccession so that the works that joined the collection in that period remain amongst our holdings.

[As an aside, I should note that, for his part, Manson championed the German artist Herbert Gurschner, of whose *Annunciation* he claimed: ‘It can hold its own with distinction even among those early [Renaissance] paintings when the subject had a spiritual significance for painters, profounder than any it can have for the artists of to-day’ [6, p. 5].

An opportunity to review this moment, has allowed us to place this work on display once again in the current exhibition of Magic Realism.

I suspect that this oscillation between rejection and reassessment of progressive and conservative acquisitions can be traced in many public collections. This is the character of which a collection is built.

2. International art at Tate

After this outline, it will not come as a surprise that the scope and definitions of the ‘international art’ as shown at the Tate has changed considerably over time. It was, for instance, still known as ‘foreign art’ until the 1980s. This experience is a microcosm of much wider cultural debates and cultural politics, but provides a concentrated experience peculiar to the institution.

An awareness of this history has, in my view, also helped to inflect the positions which are now available us. Having worked recently with colleagues at the Centre Pompidou and the Reina Sofia on an exhibition of the mid-twentieth-century Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam, the

fact that Tate acquired *Ibaye* immediately after it was made in 1951 has rooted the work within the history of the collection. The additional fact that Tate *did not continue to acquire* Lam's work also tells a story of its own.

This was entangled in the drive to embrace 'high modernism' some time after the establishment of its importance. In so doing, the interesting engagement with those (such as Lam) in danger of being marginalised, was cut short. In other words, a process of 'catching up' to redress the perceived inadequacies of predecessors' choices diverted energy from the emerging interest in those pushed, for whatever reasons, outside that orthodoxy.

Such is the power of the 'cannon'.

The impetus from academia in the 1980s and 1990s to revise the linear account of this 'master narrative' took longer to permeate the museums. Indeed, the expansion of collections at the time sought to keep track of contemporary artistic practices — especially among artists turning to installation and film. Subject to favourable economic and social factors, this also encouraged a wave of museum expansions.

In the case of Tate, a desire to share the national collection across the country more widely brought the development of Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives. However, the need to grow further in the capital was limited by the site in London.

3. Tate Modern in 2000

It was understood that Tate Modern should open in 2000 with a new overarching display philosophy. This was guided by a number of conceptual and practical realisations which included:

The strengths and limitations of the collection.

The acknowledgement of multiple stories in place of a single monolithic succession.

The importance of including photography displays (which for historical reasons the responsibility of the Science Museum and the V&A).

The equally crucial desire to integrate film and video within the displays (rather than in dedicated 'black boxes').

The architectural form given to the space by Herzog & de Meuron in response to Giles Gilbert Scott's original power station also produced determinants:

The four-part structure of the two collection floors, arranged along the length of the building but divided by the chimney.

And visitor survey evidence showed that a visit would probably last for 40 minutes, and only cover half a floor of the new museum.

The first two of these points — the nature of the collection and the need to see it multivalently — grew naturally out of the thinking around changing displays at the Tate Gallery over the preceding decade. It was also encouraged by the research into multiple art histories.

The resulting scheme was to make thematic displays, and these — initially — took the historic genres of 17th century Academic practice as a basis from which to explore their resonances in contemporary art.

The scheme had the significant advantage of allowing *a* history of the last hundred years to be told through each suite of galleries. This established a foundation that has evolved in different ways over the last eighteen years.

The apparent abandonment of chronology in 2000 caused considerable public debate. Five years after opening, the critic Martin Gayford recalled the ‘in Tate Modern art history sometimes seems to have stopped: everything exists in a perpetual present; art from a hundred years ago jostles art from the day before yesterday’ [4, p. 10]. While there are several aspects to this observation, it is perhaps worth noting that the sense of a perpetual present captured — perhaps inadvertently — a deeper thread emerging in public life which coincided with our constant connectedness in the digital world. In understanding (however subliminally) the need for this direct engagement, our displays placed an emphasis on research *and* the visitors’ experience in a way that could reach a wider audience. This may be an aspect of their sustained success.

From a structural point of view, the thematic displays employ a mixture of **display typologies**. This was a strategy from the outset, so as to vary the pace and relationship between galleries encountered in sequence. The nature of the links was much debated by curators, and continues to be a key element in the way in which they are devised. Although the visitor can understand each room individually, we try to anticipate the cumulative experience, to make connections or disruptions.

The initial display typologies can be listed as follows:

Introductions: groups in opening rooms to each ‘display suite’

Monographic (including film or video spaces)

Pairings

Cross-century themes

Groups

Most of these are still part of our current practice.

In 2000, the **pairings** of artists proved controversial. Some critics saw the juxtapositions less as extending relationships and more as curatorial “attention seeking”. The most challenging pairing was the juxtaposition of Claude Monet’s *Waterlilies* with Richard Long’s wall drawing and stone circle. This was seen, in some quarters at least, as an assault on an ‘old friend’, even though they shared an immersion in the landscape — *and* Long made his work in response to the Monet.

Among the dangers of this scheme was how to draw-out the meaning for the visitor without making the art *illustrative* of the curatorial thesis. Certainly, there was a view that the public (or the media speaking for the public) could not understand what the thematic displays were about, mainly because of their departure from the chronology and the ‘isms’ traditionally found in galleries. It is important to note that this complaint disappeared quite quickly. This would suggest, at the very least, that familiarity with new juxtapositions brought a new excitement in finding the unexpected.

4. Tate Modern rehangs

At the outset, there was also a resolution that one's orthodoxy in showing the collection should not simply be replaced by another, which was equally static. New schemes would result in re-hanging the collection periodically. Major changes occurred in 2006 and 2009, which introduced and renewed a focus on 'paradigm shifts' in artistic practice of the previous hundred years.

Our familiarity with the gallery space and its use by our visitors also allowed us to move walls and to modify visitor flow. We added a central 'hub' gallery in each wing to the display typologies, in order to give physical significance of the paradigmatic moments (initially around Cubism, Surrealism, Informel and Minimalism). To some extent, this was a 'return to chronology', though it is more accurate to say that it was a heightening of an awareness of history and time.

The inclusion of a 'hub' was accompanied by a greater emphasis upon monographic rooms spiralling around it. And the 'pairings' were relocated to introductory rooms, in order to give a sense of the issues that would arise as the visitor passed through the ensuing galleries.

Looking back now, this scheme appears locked into — even reinforcing — the canonical view, but in other ways, it extended the shift in emphasis, as it did *not* offer an imposed linear narrative.

Furthermore, we were beginning to embed within this scheme a greater internationalism. This began to be significant within our displays, as the intense period of research and acquisition began to bear fruit.

At the same time, the prospect of the expansion of Tate Modern began to be considered. As Michael Craig Martin had noted in the first Tate Modern Handbook, the original architectural solution had allowed for the potential for our 'ambitious development plans, [as] more than a third of the space in the existing building (... on the south side) remained undeveloped' [1, p. 15].

5. The New Tate Modern 2016

It may be discerned that it is the commitment to thematic displays of the collection that has allowed us to explore more easily and to move towards telling multiple stories about art made after 1900.

A key purpose of the way that the collection is now shown, since the opening of the New Tate Modern in 2016, is to question, disrupt and enrich the established, canonical, view of a single "master-narrative", so as to diversify our experiences and allow space for work that has been excluded in earlier histories. Such a revision lets more people engage with more art from more places [3].

The fact that there are now multiple entrances to Tate Modern, provides an architectural complexity that also speaks to the multiple stories that are told through the art encountered inside.

Whether arriving down the western ramp, through the river entrance or from the south terrace, the visitor is taken into the Turbine Hall and across to the Tanks, in which we show installations, films, and live art in seasons of programmed events.

What now marks out the displays that were launched two years ago is a much larger vision of the world. This is part of an appreciation that established structures, with which we were eager to catch up, have concealed ingrained assumptions, limited by habit, bias and discrimination.

The rethinking required by this process is, necessarily, ongoing. It exposes the fact that traditional art history offered only limited narratives.

Our contention would be that the habitual can no longer be treated preferentially as the *only* worthy, innovative or era-defining art. There are — have always been — other stories to tell. This is not to say that the familiar is excluded, but that it can be seen in new contexts and through different lenses.

There are historic inequalities in the ‘economy of attention’ that has been afforded artists hitherto marginalised by the narrative. We find, repeatedly, that those, whose work now comes as a revelation, have been through this cycle before.

The work of the Lebanese painter and sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair has recently joined the collection, and been the subject of an exhibition. She appeared to be a discovery for a recent generation of curators and audiences, ignorant of the fact that Choucair was much admired in the 1960s and exhibited at the Venice Biennale. The same can be pattern can be traced for Fahrelnissa Zeid and for Ibrahim El Salahi, to name just two other artists.

Why some figures were included — or survived within the narrative — and others not, is a complex cocktail of commercial and critical support as well as a reflection on the cultural climate at any one time. Some critics would point to (unconscious?) racism as an underlying current that continues to allow the dominant culture to dismiss the production of those considered ‘other’.

Inclusion in order to redress this inequality is urgently required. Looking back over the last 100 years, one of the most fertile periods in which art from many parts of the world can be brought into meaningful conversation remains the 1950s. In a large room in our current displays we have been able to include El Salahi and Germaine Richier, Dorothea Tanning and Tsuyoshi Maekawa, as well as Markus Grigorian and Ernest Mancoba amongst many others, to give a rich sense of the complexity of making art after the catastrophe of the Second World War and in the ‘Atomic era’. Here the multiple voices enhance an understanding that previously would have been confined to Jackson Pollock, Jean Dubuffet and Asger Jorn.

Alongside this rethinking, lies an increasing awareness of our audiences. To attune the research required in expanding the collection to the public’s expectations and knowledge becomes part of the rewriting of the fixed history. We need to present the possibilities in a way that can inform and challenge the orthodoxies (of which the viewer may not even be aware).

This has led to more approachable texts and to the generous over-arching titles for the displays, which remain open to different levels of engagement.

The current displays in the Boiler House (the original Tate Modern), for instance, are titled, rather generously, ‘Approaches to Modern Art (1900 to Now)’. Following our established pat-

tern, they offer a variety of approaches through public and private art worlds, through the exploitation of media and materials. At the heart of one set of displays are Mark Rothko's iconic *Seagram Murals* — still much in demand — and, adjacent to them, the *Cage* paintings by Gerhardt Richter and a selection of works by Bridget Riley; each raises the physical and conceptual challenges of working on a grand scale.

As well as employing the display typologies already discussed, we introduced in 2016 rooms entitled 'a view from...' These focus on centres beyond Western Europe and North America. In selecting them, we wanted to look at places of artistic convergence, where transactions brought familiar and less familiar artists together in new ways. Currently we have chosen the activities of the *New Tendencias* group in Zagreb, the São Paulo Biennial, the Tokyo Biennial and the *Centro de Arte y Communication* in Buenos Aires. All show explicitly international gatherings.

One concern here, frankly, is the level of precision with which we can tell these stories from within the collection to reflect the research required. In an exhibition, we would borrow works to achieve a 'reconstruction'; within the collection, there has to be something of an imaginative leap to convey the essence rather than the particularities.

Just as with Rothko, Richter, and Riley, so there is a continuing emphasis on providing the public with an experience of an artist's practice in some density through monographic rooms. This may be through single installations as exemplified by Cildo Meireles's massive *Babel* 2001 in 'Media Networks', which shows the confusion of communication, or Magdalena Abakanowicz's earthy and intestinal *Embryology* 1978–1980 in the 'Materials and Objects' display.

These two large installations are also part of an underlying strategy. In reviewing the structure of Tate's holdings, the limited number of works by women artists was long a concern, in need of rectification.

It was simple enough to decide in 2009 that the pairings introducing each wing of galleries should have gender parity. We have now shifted this challenge to the monographic displays throughout, so that at any one time there should be as many single displays given to women as to men. This has a profound impact on the ways in which we think about collecting and displaying, as well as the impression of culture that our audience takes away.

As well as being able to show, *Embryology* for the first time in London, this approach generated displays re-examining the work of Louise Nevelson alongside the contemporary installations of Sheela Gowda (*Behold* 2009), and Phyllida Barlow (*untitled (upturned house)*, 2012). Other key displays have included a room of Rebecca Horn's works, Ana Lupa's *The Solemn Process* 1964–2008, as well as works by Maria Bartuszova and Irina Nakhova.

These concerns have also been found in the sequence of multi-room monographic displays from the ARTISTS ROOMS collection, which was acquired jointly in 2008 by Tate and the National Galleries of Scotland for sharing across the country. The space at Tate Modern now acts as a sort of exemplary centre for the national programme.

The first display in 2016 was of the works of Louise Bourgeois in s deliberate echo of the first Turbine Hall project in 2000. This has been followed by Bruce Nauman and is currently devoted to Jenny Holzer.

As well as affording more space for our public and more space for art, one of the purposes of the new Blavatnik Building was to allow us to show more installation works and to engage more fully with ‘live’ art and performance.

This is grounded in the activities in the Tanks, but include individual displays elsewhere in the building, such as Tehching Hsieh’s *One Year Performance* and rooms from Meshac Gaba’s *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997–2002*. Performances may be found in a variety of locations around the building, some intended as gallery spaces and others more public and improvised.

The changing displays — and annual “Live exhibitions” — in the Tanks provide the foundation for these concerns. The spaces allow us to show works on an extraordinary scale and to include performances that had been impossible in ‘normal’ gallery conditions. This is another major shift in emphasis. It encompasses artists hitherto confined to an indeterminate zone between art and dance that has long been occupied by artistic video and film work.

The temporal nature of the work, however, introduces a sequence of questions for the museum that are still being answered. These include:

How does a museum of objects ‘own’ and preserve the performative work in perpetuity?

How can systems develop to embrace the inevitable change that will be most evident in re-performing?

What is the role and reliability of documentation — the record or the residue?

How does a museum embrace the distinct requirements of ‘live’ work, including the performer and the public desire for participation.

As our answers to these questions develop, so they shape the view offered in the spaces. The performances on Tarek Atui’s hand-made musical instruments have stood alongside minimalist works by Rasheed Araeen, Robert Morris, and Charlotte Posenenske. And our annual ‘Live Exhibition’ — this year coordinated with the major exhibition of Joan Jonas — punctuates the calendar in the spring, between immersive installation works occupying those spaces (including works by Susan Hiller, John Akomfrah, Otobong Nkanga, Janet Cardiff, Amar Kanwar, Emeka Ogboh, Jordan Wolfson).

Much of what I have described was put into action for in June 2016, but — obviously — represented years of preparatory discussion and planning.

Since then the pace has hardly relented. We change more than thirty galleries of displays each year, so as to rest works on paper and video works, and to bring new texture to the experience through showcasing new acquisitions.

A major project in the last year has been to understand how the public use the new part of the building and to respond to that usage. We have, for instance, begun to introduce works into the concourse areas, so that art is encountered in extraordinary spaces all along the visi-

tors' journey. This is a development through which a number of remarkable works within the collection can be brought to respond to the inventiveness of the architecture.

As a counterpoint to our exhibitions, the function of the displays at Tate Modern, as elsewhere, is essentially to bring the collection to public view in ways that reveal the imagination and intention of the artists, and to reflect upon the circumstances in which the works were made. As a result of our work on revising our approach, the range and identities of those artists included in our displays has expanded considerably. We are still at the beginning of this research to rebalance the collection.

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Title. Diverse Experiences: Strategies of Display at Tate Modern

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Abstract. Since opening in 2000, Tate Modern's thematic displays of the collection have increasingly allowed for multiple stories to be told about art made after 1900. The purpose is to question, disrupt, and enrich the established, canonical, view of a single master-narrative so as to diversify our experiences and allow space for work that has been excluded in earlier histories. Such a revision lets us all engage with more art. As a result, the range and identities of artists has expanded considerably and with that shift has come the inclusion of different media. Such openness has only been possible because of a programme of changing annual displays and by completely re-installing the collection on a number of occasions, most recently for the opening of the New Tate Modern in 2016. Tate Modern's strategies for display are, therefore, open to a wide range of ideas and concerns that reflect our position of connecting our audience with the art of the times.

Keywords: Tate Modern, changing annual displays, collection

Название статьи. Многогранный опыт: стратегии экспонирования в Тейт Модерн

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Аннотация. В галерее Тейт Модерн с самого момента её открытия в 2000 г. применяется тематический принцип экспонирования коллекции, что даёт возможность представить разноплановые истории искусства начиная с 1900 г. Цель — подвергнуть сомнению, поколебать и обогатить устоявшийся канонический нарратив, расширить наш кругозор и дать место работам, исключённым из предыдущих версий истории искусства. Такая переоценка позволила нам всем взаимодействовать с большим количеством произведений искусства. В результате существенно расширился круг художников, что повлекло за собой включение различных средств массовой информации. Такая публичность стала возможна благодаря программе ежегодной смены экспозиции, а также полной реэкспозиции коллекции по особым случаям, последний из которых — открытие нового здания Тейт Модерн в 2016 г. Стратегии экспонирования Тейт Модерн, таким образом, открыты для широкого круга идей и концепций, что соответствует нашей миссии привлечения всё более широкой аудитории к взаимодействию с современным искусством.

Ключевые слова: Тейт Модерн, ежегодная смена экспозиции, коллекция