Tate Modern: London's new gallery of twentieth century modern art

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Long awaited, the opening of the Tate Modern at the converted Bankside power station on the south bank of the Thames has been hailed as a triumph. The new site houses the Tate's collection of international modern art from 1900 to the present day, previously displayed in the much smaller premises at Millbank, which have become the Tate Britain. (The Tate Modern web site can be found at: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/default.htm)

Almost alone of the government supported millennium projects, Tate Modern has been welcomed as a worthwhile addition to London. In contrast to the general disinterest in the Millennium Dome further down the river, the new gallery has acquired a genuine hold on the popular imagination, reflected in a huge increase in visitor numbers. One million have visited in the last six weeks. Not even the enforced closure, for safety reasons, of a new footbridge across the Thames has been able to detract from the new museum's success.

The cynical have said that its popularity is because, unlike the Dome, there is no entrance charge. This is undoubtedly a factor, and certainly one that will keep people coming back, but it is not even half the story.

It owes some of its popularity to its architecture. Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron have been widely praised for their work in adapting the interior of the Bankside power station (http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/building/default.htm). Its squat, imposing redbrick bulk also has a certain pedigree in nostalgic views of London, sharing features with other power stations along the river, including the most famous of them, Battersea. Bankside may not have been the most popular building there, but it was already a fixture on the south bank horizon.

One only begins to comprehend the full scale of the building from inside. Herzog and de Meuron have divided its massive 200m length in half, and the west entrance opens onto the great Turbine Hall, a space the length and height of the whole building. On the northern side of the building, windowed off from the Turbine Hall, are five floors of galleries.

There is still a hum of electricity in the Turbine Hall, as part of the power station remains currently active. (It is proposed that this space too will eventually become incorporated into the gallery). It is not just upwards that there is an awesome sense of space: viewing windows have been cut into the southern wall allowing a sight of the empty spaces that still remain in the hull of the building. (For a java 3-D panorama of the Turbine Hall see: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/panorama/pano.htm)

The sheer dimensions of the Turbine Hall require something extraordinarily huge to make any kind of impression on the space. Louise Bourgeois has created three immense metal towers, which occupy the far end of the hall. Accessible by stairs, they have viewing platforms with mirrors offering a range of perspectives on the space. They offer a different perspective into the gallery areas, as well as being visible from above from the gallery windows. They are striking pieces, which play with the idea of vision that the gallery as a whole seeks to promote, as well as offering a number of views of the gallery itself. They are not, however, the most impressive of her pieces on display here.

On the first floor level there is a platform in the centre of the Turbine Hall, connecting it with the galleries to the north. Here, standing looming down on the first approach to the room, is Bourgeois' giant metal spider sculpture *Maman* (http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unilever.htm). Surprisingly delicate from a distance, it becomes surprisingly sturdy when you get close enough underneath it to see the huge mesh sack of eggs it carries under its belly. Even more than the towers, *Maman* dominates this room with its (literally) pregnant presence.

The escalator lobby at the centre of the building opens onto the Turbine Hall, and there are also reading rooms on the fifth floor looking out onto the Thames, as does a chimney space up the spine of the structure. Most of the galleries are on the small side, but this is offset by the long views that open up throughout the building. To some extent, the works in the Turbine Hall also dominate the galleries, being visible from platforms across the middle of the building, as well as from reading rooms on the third floor. This, at times, unexpected openness maintains the sense of space when one gets up into the galleries; the feeling of enormity continues even up into the smallest galleries.

The Tate Modern houses a huge and overwhelming collection. Two of the gallery floors are dedicated to the permanent collection while a third is intended for exhibitions. Given that there are nearly 30 rooms per floor, this is bound to give an impression that there is almost too much to take in. (And it is certainly too much to cover adequately in the course of this review).

It has been much commented on in the press that Tate Modern has taken a broadly thematic approach to the presentation of its artworks, rather than showing them in a strictly historical/chronological context. In many ways this follows the pattern taken at Tate Britain where the thematic approach seemed designed to strengthen a certain view of a “national” art. Here, where the collection is international in scope, that cannot be the aim. Instead, the art displayed is presented almost supra-historically; amassing items from different historical periods together across the historical divide, giving the idea that they have more in common through being representations of life than through the life that gave rise to them. Yet, like at Tate Britain, this is not the only way of looking at things here, nor does it seem to have totally dominated the way the gallery is curated.

The two permanent floors are divided broadly into four parts: *History/Memory/Society*; *Nude/Action/Body*; *Landscape/Matter/Environment*; and *Still Life/Object/Real Life*. In fact, some of these sections are of necessity more broadly historical than others. *History/Memory/Society*, for example, features some excellent analytical displays. Particularly striking is the room devoted to Picasso's *Weeping Woman*. Here there are pictures of Dora Maar, Picasso's model, as well as a wide range of other artistic responses to the Spanish Civil War, both directly agitational, like Joan Miro's *Aidez l'Espagne* poster, and more interpretative, like Dali's *Autumnal Cannibalism*

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(http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AWork?id=2651).

Here, as well, are political activities, such as a letter from the Independent Labour Party's Fenner Brockway about a fundraising trip being made by Roland Penrose of the London Surrealist Group, as well as records of Spanish political songs. There are also film clips showing, from Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* and from Lutz Becker's *Defence of Madrid 1937*. Here is a room offering a huge amount of material to analyse and assess in terms of its political content.

In the *Manifestos* room are artists from the early years of the twentieth century, committing themselves to avant-garde movements, committing themselves to some sort of new and radical vision. Here, too, are some fabulous pieces, including Max Ernst's *Pieta or Revolution by Night* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AWork?id=3800).

However for the curators what is important is not so much what these visions were, as the fact of the artists' commitment. Here are jumbled together manifestos from the Bauhaus, Surrealism, Dada, the Suprematists and the Futurists. No matter that these movements had differing aims, differing methods: what matters here is that they represent an historical period, which for the curators clearly belongs in the past. All we can do now, they seem to be saying, is try to create something new by continuing to jumble up the past. Yet in the Picasso room they are pointing at something quite different.

The juxtaposition of course shows up some interesting curiosities. I would probably have kept going grimly past Dan Flavin's arrangements of neon lights in most other galleries, and would thereby have missed his tribute to Tatlin's never-constructed Monument to the Third International (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AWork?id=4143). From the crowded room containing Picasso's *Weeping Woman* it is a poignant journey to Hannah Collins' pictures of Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

Nor is this just the case in this most obviously historical part of the collection. In *Nude/Action/Body*, for example, a splendid room on Automatism, including work by Henri Michaux and an Alain Resnais documentary on Hans Hartung, leads directly into a room of Giacometti's figure sculptures and subsequently a room on *Transfigurations* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=175), which deals with changing views of the body after the Second World War. Here are some wonderful examples of the alienation that was being expressed in European figure work, from Germaine Richier to Francis Bacon.

Some of the links work less well than others. There are rooms where two artists with apparently little in common are displayed alongside each other. In some cases (Henri Matisse's bronzes with Marlene Dumas' paintings, for example) they seem almost an apologetic attempt to lead the viewer on to the next room (in this particular example an interesting room on the *Myth of the Primitive* —see: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=172). In other cases, particularly that of Richard Long and Claude Monet, one finds oneself having to overcome one artwork to get at another, which seems surely self-defeating.

There are some anomalies as well in the presentation of video installations. Some of the installations (Mona Hatoum's, for example) are tucked away in corners where they are not on the beaten path. Most, however, occupy undifferentiated gallery space. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as it brings the viewer face to face with some quite extraordinary pieces, like Fernand Léger's 1924 collaboration with American cameraman Dudley Murphy, *Mechanical Ballet* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=142). What it does mean is that—for a necessarily dark room like the one showing Steve McQueen's Bear—it is not a particularly comfortable viewing experience as crowds struggle to get through to the next gallery.

In an attempt to prevent crowds congregating around explanatory text cards sited directly alongside an artwork the curators have decided to place the information some distance away from the piece it refers to. However, this does not always make it terribly easy to find the relevant information for any given work. But the result is probably still more fun than trying to view a work over the shoulders of crowds trying to read the information. I suspect it goes down as a valiant effort rather than a success.

As at the Tate Britain, the juxtaposition of artworks seems intended to stimulate further creative explorations. (This is something of a theme in London galleries at present, with the National Gallery having just opened its exhibition of takes on classical pieces by contemporary artists). Indeed, the sculptor Antony Gormley was just one of the artists who has commented on how “inspiring” he found the arrangement of pieces. Unfortunately, one result it can have in a collection of this size is that it becomes all too easy to follow the historical lines with which one is already familiar. There is, after all, plenty of excellent work here to see.

In the *Still Life/Object/Real Life* wing, for example (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ShowsInfo?id=115), I started with Kurt Schwitters' collage and the painted collages of Picasso, Braque and Gris, then moving through the Léger film I found myself, to my great delight, in a room of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia's work (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=146). Here are such fine pieces as Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze Rose Selavy?* (a wire cage full of marble blocks looking like sugar cubes, which André Breton thought one of the most splendid practical jokes he had ever seen) and Picabia's huge *The Fig-Leaf*. Given that Tate Modern will never be able to rival New York's Museum of Modern Art in terms of its holdings of surrealist and dada masterpieces, this room is of striking quality, with its large glass version of *The Bride Stripped Bare* as well as a film reel of *Anemic Cinema*, a 1926 film by Duchamp in collaboration with Man Ray and Marc Alleget.

From here, I found it interesting to see the way in which 1960s collagists had adapted the techniques of Schwitters and Duchamp. I then found myself following my own particular course again through Susan Hillier's extraordinary collection *From the Freud Museum*, where a whole wall-full of cardboard boxes contains objects and definitions that work deep within the unconscious. Looking at my notes, I see that I then followed this with a wonderful room on *Inner Worlds* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=161). Among the artists exploring the role of the unconscious and the imagination here were Rene Magritte, Giorgio di Chirico, Dorothea Tanning and Yves Tanguy. From here I found myself admiring the approach of Brancusi and Arp to *Structure and Form* (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/RoomInfo?id=162). Along the way I had taken in a small video display of Bunuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*. There is nothing terribly wrong with this peripatetic approach (I saw some of my favourite pieces again after something of an absence) and I freely admit to finding myself under the charm of the gallery.

At least two of the exhibitions I revelled in during my own private odyssey through modern art were nominally in another section of the display (*Landscape/Matter/Environment*). It seems to me that not only might the works of Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst, say, more profitably stand alongside those of Picabia, in following the course of that odyssey, I am aware that I must have missed a huge amount. In making one's own shortcuts it becomes eminently possible to miss many important works. This stems directly from the decision to arrange the pieces thematically.

In walking around the galleries, I constantly felt that Tate Modern has become the great modern art collection the old Tate at Millbank never quite was. It is a wonderful space in which to see art, and the collection is genuinely impressive. The collection feels overwhelming because it is a huge building with a huge number of rooms and a great deal to see, but this is compounded by the layout. One feels that it will take visitors a while to establish their own logical system of viewing, to arrive at their own understanding of the interrelation of the artists displayed here, yet

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this will be essential in the re-establishment of a serious artistic culture. The arrangement of the Tate Modern gives some idea of the scale of confusion that presently exists, as well as hints at some of the more interesting ideas going on within it. I would recommend Tate Modern to anyone who wants to start to understand the current state of modern art, and wants to begin to enjoy some of its delights. The new gallery makes it quite possible to work on a better understanding. I'll be going back there.

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