

Tate Modern

A year of sweet success

Esther Leslie

One room in Tate Modern is often passed through very quickly. An installation by Zurich artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss re-creates a room where redecorators are at work. Each item – buckets, brushes, a can of fizzy drink, a video cassette, palettes, a saucer of cat food – is crafted by hand from polyurethane foam and then garnished with the synthetic colours, textures and logos that befit the industrialized clutter of second nature. At first glance it all appears real – and presumably that is why some people flit through, imagining it to be an uncompleted room. The gallery is after all still new, so perhaps the builders have not packed up yet. But even if the visitor realizes that it is part of the exhibition, why linger? What could be learnt by looking closely at this jumble of objects? What pleasure could they offer that any builder's yard or domestic scene of renovation would not deliver too? And if the visitor gradually realizes that the objects are replicas, because the lines on the writing on the video box are ever so slightly wobbly, betraying their handmade status or because it becomes apparent that these familiar commodities – house paints, pet food, cigarette stubs – do not release their characteristic smells, why stay and look? The reproduction by hand of mass-produced items is nothing more than a copy art, a *trompe l'oeil*, a clever simulation – the joy produced is only the childish one that delights in imitation. Could it, however, be the case that this room at the heart of the gallery is a microcosm of the whole, dramatizing the process at hand: the art gallery no longer simply a stark white cube, but as beneficiary of a makeover, made metaphorical in the redecorating scenario?

Tate Modern remakes the space of cultural encounter. It is a gallery designed to host a new relationship between art and viewers and to house a new type of art, which might be called (borrowing a phrase from Julian Stallabrass) high art lite. Quite literally, of course, in the Fischli–Weiss room where the simulations are less than substantial; if you lifted them their weight would be incommensurate with the weight of their real-life counterparts. More broadly, Tate Modern has all the appearance of a gallery, a perfectly crafted rendition. It is a simulacrum, in that it looks like a gallery should look these days, and yet certain substantial qualities that would be necessary are lacking. It has the requisite art, much of it familiar, cast downriver from the old Tate Gallery at Pimlico, but that very displacement only reinforces its insubstantiality, a sense of unfit for purpose. A tinge of temporariness summons the niggling feeling that the almost definitional permanent and reliable dustiness of traditional museum culture has been overthrown. It has given way to transience, recombination or remaindering, as museum directors try out 'this and that' in frenzied pursuit of today's museal Holy Grail: audiences, and diverse ones at that.

Tate Modern is not just trendy, but in the vanguard of a reinvention of cultural spaces worldwide. Art galleries are overhauling themselves as 'for profit' spaces where

the expertise of art workers is leased out to business and education, with online gift shops, travel planning, digital reproductions for download and so on. The Guggenheim Foundation is pushing this through most vigorously with its various e-commerce and online ventures. In April 2000 it was announced that the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Tate Gallery had formed a partnership to create for-profit e-business for individuals 'to access, understand, and purchase modern art, design, and culture'. To succeed at this type of business requires good self-promotion, which benefits from strong brand identity. This is where the Tate enterprise has worked hardest, essentially franchising its collections which are now divided up across the country in distinct collections: Tate St Ives (quiet pastel early modernism and rural figuration), Tate Liverpool (pop and populism), Tate Britain (redwhiteandblue Tudors to Turner Prize), and Tate Modern (international modern and postmodern art).

Tate is a brand that niche-markets art experience. Its galleries are showrooms. However, this is still art and not just business. The commodity must not show too glossy a face. The reclamation of an industrial space that provides the shell for the Tate Modern lends the building a fashionably squatted aspect, like Berlin water towers or crumbling arcades that serve as edgy art galleries or music venues for a while, until they give way to something more marketable or respectable. This is unlike the old purpose-built Tate with its assertive portico and reek of victory over the penitentiary that once stood in its place. Visitors ascend into that art temple – now Tate Britain. Tate Modern begins with a descent. At Tate Modern a former industrial site becomes home to the new-style 'accessibility rules' culture industry. The building is immense, a dark powerhouse outside but inside lightness and whiteness have won out over the Satanic mill. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's electricity-generating building, built in two phases in 1947 and 1963, unapologetically measured itself against the cathedral of St Paul's directly across the river. In Britain after 1945 industry was the energy that made explicit the regeneration of a nation after war. In 1981 increased oil prices switched off this power station. After religion and industry, the next great force is art. Its powers were to be harnessed to a bit of urban regeneration.

Little white cubes

It has worked. The floor is scuffed by the footsteps of five million-plus visitors. In quantitative terms, Tate Modern is a stunning success, with a million visitors in the first forty-seven days alone, banging another nail in the Teflon-coated coffin that was called The Dome. Visitor numbers are everything these days, the measure of measure. Every new attraction installs electronic sensor equipment to count the number of bodies traversing the threshold. A justified museum is a crowded, bustling one, where museum shop cash tills shwoosh with constant hushed swipe, and the stony silence of the gallery as contemplative bubble is swapped for the gallery as theme park. Tate Modern swelled total visitor numbers to national museums by almost a fifth in 2000. An extra 4.7 million people took in some gallery culture last year, and all but 700,000 of them were at Tate Modern. The £134 million conversion cost was money well spent, if exchanged into that bogus currency 'cultural capital'. The culture secretary was delighted: 'The huge success of Tate Modern shows that there is a very real interest in contemporary art, an area which is often criticized for being impenetrable and deliberately controversial' (Chris Smith, *Guardian*, 3 April 2001).

Tate Modern imitates a gallery as it imagines a newly made and fitted gallery should be. It has shaken off the vestiges of its late-nineteenth-century origins in The National Gallery of British Art, opened on 21 July 1887, to show off Henry Tate's painting collection. Tate's fortune was founded on refining sugar, but the big money came from patenting the process of its moulding into little white cubes. Henry Tate's collection of BritArt was soon crowded out, first in 1917 by Sir Henry Lane's collection of French

Impressionist artworks, and then by the fissiparous EuroArt movements of the twentieth century. Until 1965 the Tate's collections were hung in three separate parts: historical British, modern British, modern foreign. The British collection was a particular strong point. In the 1940s, the gallery collected extensively in modern British art because 'British painters have become the chief custodians of the great artistic traditions of Free Europe' (Sue Malvern, 'War, Memory and Museums: Art and Artefact in the Imperial War Museum', *History Workshop Journal* 49, Spring 2000, p. 202). However, for a more self-consciously modern postwar world, a resegmenting in 1965 separated British art up to 1900 from modern art in general, since, according to the Tate annual report, 'the art of the present is indivisible and it is no service to British artists to consider them in isolation'. (Or was it a case of final admission that British art never weathered modernism successfully, and had to concede its place as an also-ran?)

The next step was to jettison the national past. The new official website barely acknowledges the presence of British art in the theme park of modernity: 'Housed in the former Bankside Power Station, Tate Modern displays the Tate collection of international modern art from 1900 to the present day, including major works by Dalí, Picasso, Matisse, Rothko and Warhol as well as contemporary work by artists such as Dorothy Cross, Gilbert & George and Susan Hiller' (of course much of the British stuff is in exile at Millbank). Origins and history junked: what remains as distributive principle? The gallery of the twenty-first century takes existing raw material and organizes it thematically. Collection 2001 is arranged in four groups: landscape, still life, the nude, history painting. Theming is a global trend, visible at MOMA New York too, where it displaces Alfred Barr's dominant paradigm of the last century: periodization, the identification of 'isms' and gallery layout as a perambulatory course in Art History. Thematic hanging is designed to elicit new connections that short-circuit chronology and explode geography – so Monet's 'Waterlilies' faces two Richard Long works, 'Red Slate Circle' and a specially commissioned mud wall painting. Yet still each work – newly cross-indexed or not – sits or hangs in the space of art. And it is fairly traditional art space for all that, one that showcases but does not think through the implications of much avant-garde practice of the last eighty years.

Hit or miss

Had it taken seriously the challenges of Dadaesque anti-art and the postwar movements of Fluxus and mail art, conceptualism and Land Art (all present in its airy rooms), Tate Modern might have used the opportunity to take up the critique of the gallery into itself. For, with renewed vengeance from the 1960s onwards, art movements have



concentrated their critique on the existence and power of the gallery. And yet here the familiar outlines of the traditional-modern art gallery still exist – ‘don’t touch’ objects ensconced by the invisible aura of electrical alarm (though the happy-clappy atmosphere of accessibility forces guards to take up more covert surveillance positions). Hans Haacke’s British Leyland/South Africa series glowers from one wall, but his conclusions remain bracketed as historical exemplar rather than provocation to the legitimation of art. Haacke’s work was a dual critique of the corporate world and the gallery system and exposed the links between the two in terms of sponsorship, patronage, ownership, with art as the kid-glove, civilizing face of business. Were Haacke’s influence to have spilled beyond his few posters into the wider gallery, one might have expected the accompanying slogans of the art works to tell the viewer more than just how delightful and tricky it is to capture in paint fading Breton sunlight on a late summer’s day. Decontextualized formalism is today’s paint-by-numbers of art appreciation. The art is accompanied by instructions for viewing, or friendly hints for use from celebrities and quasi-intellectuals such as David Bowie or Will Self. There is only one Haackesque moment in the gallery. The title caption for one of Patrick Caulfield’s canvases notes, as explanation of its acquisition, ‘given in lieu of tax’. Interesting, but by whom?

Critique and delegitimation are undercurrents that eddy in the wake of modern art. They find some form perhaps in Tate Modern’s more casualized relationship between viewer and artworks. At its most exaggerated are the vandal attacks on a number of works. Tom Dixon’s pile of multicoloured plastic lights was pushed over by two men and remained in a heap, as gallery staff feared a repeat if they put it back together again. Michael Landy’s *Costermonger’s Stall* had flowers plucked from it. Fischli and Weiss’s installation had graffiti scrawled on it and some of the ‘pallets’ have been kicked so much that chipped paint exposes the yellow polyurethane core. Art critic Brian Sewell regards this vandalism as an act of criticism: ‘If people are affronted by what to them is pretending to be a work of art they will have no sympathy with it.’ And he adds that he has seen people slipping pieces of the Fischli–Weiss into their bags. Sewell is an anti-modernist and would not allow the abused works to rank in the canon of art. To attack them is justified for they are worthless as art. A modernist might agree, though for different reasons, that art-vandalism is a type of critique, a post-Dada anti-art practice, done in full knowledge of the debates and arguments on gallery culture and its discontents. But the gallery is able to contain such critique, since such acts of vandalism do not pose too great a threat, and indeed fulfil a certain promise guaranteed by our new fun-based settlement with art. The gallery invites a user-friendly ‘hit-or-miss’ approach through its patronage of levelled values and jolly relativism, and so ought to concede that these art-assaults stem, in fact, from dogged commitment to the gallery’s postmodern logic. They are another by-product of its success. Tate Modern presents itself as so accessible, so people-friendly, so all-embracing, that ‘the people’ simply want a piece of the action, light-fingering a knick-knack for the mantelpiece, childishly donating a signature of their own.