

INTERVIEW WITH TATE MODERN DIRECTOR CHRIS DERCON TATE MODERN, 14TH OF DECEMBER, 2012

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In 2012, freelance journalist Lara Pawson met with Tate Modern Director Chris Dercon. During the course of the interview, Dercon discussed the Tate's recent acquisitions in African Art alongside a series of exhibitions held in Britain, Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. In what follows, Dercon addresses the problem of canonification, the politics of location and reading the Tate as a "brand". As the exhibiting of art within Africa becomes increasingly privatised, what are the implications for its accessibility and sustainability across local and global arenas?

Last year, Britain's TATE galleries announced a new Africa programme comprising three elements. The first is the acquisition of a number of works by modern and contemporary African artists, including El Anatsui (Ghana), Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudan), David Goldblatt (South Africa) and Samuel Fosso (Cameroon), among others. A second aspect of the programme comes in the shape of several major exhibitions held not only in Tate's British galleries but also in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. From July to September, in London, the first major exhibition in the series will take place, a retrospective of over 100 works by the painter El-Salahi. *The Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002), a seminal work by Meschac Gaba (Benin), also goes on display in London this year. The final feature of Tate's Africa

programme is that a large chunk of funding has been provided by Nigeria's Guaranty Trust Bank. Chris Dercon is the director of Tate Modern, and the man credited by some for the museum's engagement in contemporary African art. Lara Pawson [freelance writer & journalist] went to meet him at his office by the River Thames. She began by asking him:

Lara Pawson (LP): Simon Njami credits you, very positively, with the Tate Africa projects. Have you come to Africa through the art market and your work in the art world, or do you have a deeper personal engagement with the continent?

Chris Dercon (CD): I'm Belgian! (Laughs) I was raised in Tervueren [in Flanders, Belgium] and in the backyard was the Musée de l'Afrique So, from a very early age, the musée was my playground. I've also lived in Brussels, so Matonge [a neighbourhood with a high population of people of African descent] was very normal to me. But much more interesting is that my father was an urbanist and he worked in Abuja [in Nigeria]. My brother also worked in Nigeria, and I started to go there myself when I was 23 or 24 years-old. And then this third thing was my own very deep interest in what's going on in other cities of the world, which is why I was one of the founding members of the Institute of International Visual Arts [a London-based cultural centre, which established in 1994 to address an imbalance in the representation of culturally diverse artists, curators and writers] . I was on the board with Gavin Jantjes and Stuart [Hall], who was seminal for me, and also Sarat Maharaj. And then, I was very active in Holland in organisations which worked in the Middle East and in Africa. For example, there is the



Chris Dercon, Tate Modern director, in a market in Lubumbashi, DRC. Photo: Sammy Baloji

film festival in Rotterdam which is the Hubert Bals Foundation, and which promotes films from other regions. And my nephews are very famous anthropological film makers who worked with Jean Rouch, so that is another contact.

LP: Right.

CD: – and then Rem Koolhaas with the Lagos project. I was very close to Rem when I was working in Rotterdam. And also, I have a very deep interest in textiles, and I started to go to those countries where I could find great textiles, so Mali has become very important. I always go to the Tuareg market and, for many years now, I only wear my "Tuaregi" [pulls out a wide piece of brown cotton, gathered into a scarf], which I bought for one Euro. I buy this stuff all the time [Laughs]. And these all add up, these things, and become normal. And I speak French!

LP: So that helps?



Meschac Gaba, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

CD: Well, I was not going out consciously thinking “Now I’m going to take an interest in Africa.” No! I felt an obligation that I should know more about it. Oh, and my successor [at Haus der Kunst -- literally, “house of art”] in Munich is Okwui Enwezor [Laughs]. And with Simon [Njami] and others, I have, for many years, been doing the Goethe photography workshop in Africa. I just came back from Lubumbashi [DRC] a couple of weeks ago. So, in a way, it’s kind of normal isn’t it?

LP: I can see a certain trajectory.

CD: I started very early on to work with Meschac Gaba [a Beninois now living in Rotterdam]. I was the witness at his wedding to my curator Alexandra van Dongen, so in his work the *Musée d’Art Contemporain Africain*, where you see the wedding group in the Marriage Room, shown at the 2012 Triennial de Paris, that’s me! So it’s like [laughing] if you ask me, “Is it the art market?”, I’d say yes; “Is it politics?”, I’d say yes; “Is it Belgium?”, I’d say yes;

and “Is it family?”, again, yes! It’s all of that. It’s a very normal thing.

When Achille [Mbembe] says in [his book] *Sortie de la Grand Nuit* that there is something happening that is beyond pan-Africanism and beyond *la Négritude* – what he calls “Afropolitanism” – then I understand. Because even when I was a child, I was used to seeing people – the Belgian diaspora – moving back and forth, doing things here and there. But I wouldn’t call them the diaspora any more: I would call that whole thing Afropolitanism.

So, [claps hands, laughs], for me it’s nothing adventurous, it’s nothing folk-loric, it’s nothing exotic. It’s a very normal thing. Does that make sense?

LP: Moving on! Given that you are so familiar with the postcolonial and, as some say, post-postcolonial debates, why is this Tate programme still specifically titled “African”? As your own colleague, Elvira Dyangani Ose, has suggested, why can’t an African artist just be an artist?

CD: But don’t credit me with Tate Africa. Look at where Tate started, in 2000, with “Century City”. It made me incredibly jealous. It showed an incredible curiousness and willingness to open Tate to the rest of the world. I found it fantastic that they asked Okwui [Enwezor] to deal with Lagos in a way that the Nigerians are dealing with Lagos, with a mix of low and high culture. That was a very big opening shot. And then of course, if you look at London and Great Britain with Iniva, but also at Tate Britain, with “Migrations”, with all its flaws and whatever – there is a deep interest in Tate to take these things seriously and to stop talking about the NATO countries and to stop talking about the art from Europe

and to stop talking about the art from America. Especially, there is an interest to go beyond those artists who live here or who came here like so many museums, which say that they deal with the Middle East and with African artists, but which only look for the artists who are working here.

LP: You mean the so-called diaspora?

CD: Right. The so-called diaspora. It’s very important to go *there* [clicks fingers] because that means that you suddenly have something which Achille [Mbembe] discusses: All these artists who work here and there and here and there. And I would like to call that Africa! Because Africa is an amazing continent and inside that continent you have all these contradictions and conflicts and regions. It’s a region which deserves our attention.

LP: But this still doesn’t explain why you have to put those artists under the umbrella of “Africa”? Why can’t they just be selected as artists in their own right? Why do you have to have this special project, of acquisitions and projects that are particular to ‘African art’?

CD: Well, because we do that with acquisitions committees. We look at South Asia, we look at the Middle East, and at the sub-Saharan countries. We see a lot of collectors who are travelling back and forth, who want to help us establish a collection of artists who have been working for a very long time. For example, it’s very important for us to say, “Listen, Ibrahim El-Salahi, he lives in Oxford, but don’t forget that he used to live in Qatar and before that, he was one of the most important muralists in Khartoum.” And

the modernist architecture of Khartoum is so important. If you speak about urbanism and you don’t look at what’s happening in Dakar and Khartoum, you don’t understand these countries. So, to say “African art” is a way to go to these oeuvres from the 1950s and 1960s – to [the South African-born avant garde artist] Ernest Mancoba and Ibrahim El -Salahi – where you need to look at *there*, not only *here*.

And to look at *there* is a danger, but it’s an interesting danger because you know what’s going to happen in ten years with everything which we call Afropolitanism? We will have to look into Chinese artists working in Congo, or Turkish artists working in Senegal. And Achille [Mbembe] is saying that all these things are going much more rapidly than we think!

We want to be partners as well! We want to be partners with local curators and local artists. One of the most important local curators is [the Cameroonian] Koyo Kouoh of Raw Material in Dakar in Senegal. So if you simply throw it all together and just look for “global artists” because everything is a utopia realised, you are not being precise.

LP: Tate is already a huge global brand. Are you saying that Tate’s brand and Tate’s logo will now be visible in various cities across the continent? I know that you are planning to go to various cities.

CD: We are going to Accra, yes. And to Lagos, where we did Level 2 with Guaranty Trust Bank, and that is a way to co-produce and co-realise together.

LP: So will there be more of that? Tate becoming a known brand in these African cities?

CD: I hate the word brand and I hate the word logo.

LP: I’m not mad about them either, but the fact is that Tate is a brand and has a very well-known logo.

CD: In the first place it has to be affective instead of effective. And affective means that people are keeping their eyes open to the fact that we are realising this acquisition of Meschac Gaba, for example. His *Musée d’Art Contemporain Africain* is, in the first place, a critique on the way we perceive Africa – on the way we perceive things going on there, and sustainability and aesthetics. It was originally conceived in Amsterdam and makes much more sense in London than in Benin or Côte d’Ivoire, because here, it works like a mirror for everything else you do. That’s why I’m really happy that in the summer of 2013, it will take up a whole wing – that’s 12 rooms – of Tate! You cannot overlook that.

We will also have Ibrahim El-Salahi in the post-surrealist rooms. He is now hanging where he belongs, next to the COBRA [or CoBrA, the 1940s European avant-garde movement], next to Karel Appel, but also next to Robert Motherwell and in front of Dorothea Tanning. So we are taking out some of the local produce and showing it in a different context.

I don’t think it’s effective to just pour money into Africa to support another local biennial here and there. That’s a form of postcolonialism which is becoming very dangerous. And if you speak to the Africans, they say, “Hey! Don’t think you have to do things for us! We will work with you and that means sharing exhibitions and taking on different partnerships!” For example, the photo workshops I do with



Meschac Gaba, *Draft Room*, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

Simon [Njami] in Africa – this is part of this new kinds of Afropolitanism. Does that make sense?

LP: Yes, totally. But I suppose one question to ask is why this is only happening now? There are galleries in London, like the October Gallery, who’ve been doing this for decades, working for example with El-Anatsui for nearly quarter of a century!

CD: It’s true.

LP: So I’m trying to work this out. We, in the global North, in Europe, are having to rethink our position in the world. Our economies are spiralling whereas in Africa, several countries are experiencing rapid economic expansion. There’s a sense of incredible energy.

CD: Self confidence, you mean.

LP: There’s a shifting taking place in the globe – of identities, of power and so on – so what I want

to understand is whether Tate is waking up to this, albeit a little late, and trying to catch up with the curve; or whether money coming out of the African continent is pushing Tate to work with African curators and artists?

CD: I think it has also to do with the fact that Tate is called Tate Modern, right? I think we have started to question what we mean by modernity. Suddenly we are becoming aware that there are different forms of modernities. And I am afraid that if we are not on the look-out for these different modernities – and these different economies because they are not the same as us, and these different forms of government – if we are not on the look-out for them and do not understand them, then we are going to miss the boat.

There is so much going on in Africa. There are so many possibilities that are created by individuals, who are much more mobile, both in spirit and in body; they keep crossing the world, popping up here and there, and we know that they are starting to have an influence. We want to be part of this excitement and this energy. We want to be part of this new form of radical thinking.

LP: Right. And it's also true of money too. Money is coming out in different places now. Hence, GT Bank's involvement in this Tate Africa project.

CD: Not only GT Bank!

LP: Who else?

CD: Well we are also investing our own money. So it's not just thanks to GTB that we are doing this.



Meschac Gaba, Museum Restaurant, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

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GTB is an amazing impetus and support, but if there was not GTB we would have looked for someone else.

LP: So the impetus didn't come from GT Bank? You're saying it came from you at Tate looking for partners?

CD: Yes! The impetus came from us looking for partners. It's not like someone comes to me and says, "Hey, I'm running an oil company on the North Pole, do you want to start collecting prehistoric utensils of the Inuit?" That's not the way it works! This is why I told you about Century City, to indicate that Tate has stuck its neck out quite early on, well aware that we've got to look at other modernities, other cities, and other forms of cosmopolitanism.

You know, London is reinventing itself constantly

and if we are not aware of the wider world then this city will become very precarious and will become a very strange, artificial city. Indeed, the recent census shows just how much London is now changing: It is now one-third completely different! And I want to know where these people are coming from, and where they are going back and forth to. Because this coming and going is a new form of pan-Africanism, a new form of *la Negritude*: it's definitely this whole beast which we don't know how to grasp yet.

LP: Just to get back to GT Bank for a moment. You went and you found them as a partner?

CD: Yes, these things fall together. If you put these signals out – that you would like to start opening up to the world – then suddenly these possibilities start coming.

LP: So will you tell me the percentage of GT Bank's investment?

CD: No. I can't tell you.

LP: Is it substantial?

CD: It's substantial. Absolutely.

LP: And are there other African companies providing funds?

CD: Not yet, but we are working with the Africa acquisitions committee to look for support beyond GTB, and of course we have partnerships with local organisations and also with really international, multilateral organisations that invest in these kind of international projects, such as the Goethe

Institute. In fact they are a good example. They say that it's not about an expansionism of German culture into Africa. They think about investing in infrastructure so that at some point they can take advantage of their investment in Africa. And that's why the Goethe is investing in these photo workshops in Africa – because we know that photography is one of the most mobile, important, engaging and one of the most free kind of disciplines. The photographers that Simon [Njami] and I work with are kids who are journalists, bloggers, and artists. They do all these things at the same time! Now, in order for me to understand that, I need to go there, to Africa. And we also need to buy art, not just an exchange of money, but so that people can start to feel they are being taken incredibly seriously.

LP: That leads us nicely to my next question. What criteria does Tate use to decide which works – I'm talking specifically about the current Africa acquisitions – it will acquire?

CD: We decided, first and foremost, that it's not a question of going out there as if you had shopping bags, looking for the newest of the new.

LP: Yes, I notice that some of the works you've bought are from the 1950s, for example.

CD: Yes. We're not trying to find the cheapest of the cheap so that we can buy low and sell high. We're trying to make an effort to reinforce our own collection. So, for example, looking at COBRA and looking at the post-surrealists and then trying to look at the stuff made in Africa at the same time, in the 1950s and 1960s, to consider what we might have missed.



Meschac Gaba, Salon, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

So we are looking for oeuvres. So, this is why we are interested in Ibrahim El-Salahi, who is not a new artist on the block.

LP: Aina Onabolu: You have also bought a work of his?

CD: Yes. True. So it's not about buying the newest of the new, or jumping on the bandwagon either. It's also about trying to correct an image.

LP: But some have said that "jumping on the bandwagon" is precisely what it is. I've heard from a number of academics around the world, people working in this area, that Tate is following the market, or following the money.

CD: But when I started to be interested in Ibrahim El-Salahi [laughing], there was no market for him. When I started to work with Meschac Gaba – my God! 25 years ago! -- there was not a market!

There is no canon yet! We don't know what the canon is, nor should we. It's proof that there are so many understandings still, which is incredibly important.

LP: But we're talking about what Tate is buying now, when that work does have commercial value.

CD: I'm very aware of these arguments, but following the oeuvres of El-Salahi and Meschac is not really following the market. Indeed, many colleagues in the gallery world and the museum world have been saying "Oh my God! This looks way too African! This is too anthropological!" Oh yes! [Laughs] So I would really say it's the reverse of that. And you know what this means?

LP: What?

CD: God thanks: There is no canon yet! We don't know what the canon is, nor should we. It's proof that there are so many understandings still, which is incredibly important.

LP: To return to my question about the criteria for acquiring art from Africa, do you at Tate maintain the same criteria for choosing art no matter what part of the world it is from, or do you apply special criteria for so-called "African art"?

CD: We try to apply the same criteria, which is the reason why we have such an amazing Latin American collection right now – all these very important historical oeuvres of [Brazilian artist] Hélio Oiticica

and [Swiss-born Brazilian] Mira Schendel. We could also do the newest of the new from Rio de Janeiro, but we have these historical oeuvres because we try to look just as seriously into these oeuvres and into these regions as we do for our own stuff. But, of course, you cannot say that you can look at art made in South Africa in the same way as art made in Congo! Because the East African and Southern African legacy of colonialism is very different to, say, the West African one and the Middle East.

LP: So how did you negotiate your way through that very complex terrain and decide to pick the artists and works of art that you did?

CD: Ibrahim El-Salahi for instance. He's opening our eyes to this fascinating political fact that here's an artist who starts in Khartoum, ends up in Qatar, and then goes to Oxford. It's a mixture of African and Arabic and also western forms and interests, and it's always influenced by the trajectory he takes in his life, whether it be geopolitical, political or whatever. So his work is almost like a condition of our own existence right now. Everything is like a kind of temporary relief, right [Laughs].

And Meschac [Gaba] made his museum as a comment – I still remember him telling me this – on all these buyers from Paris, who had their consultants go and buy stuff in the context of “Magiciens de la Terre”. He was very critical of that and said, ‘Do you know what? I will give them my own fucking museum!’ [Laughs] But he decided to make it in Amsterdam so at least, they couldn't take it away under the pretext that they can preserve it better than the Beninois. So, in a way, it's also a reaction.

LP: And what about female artists? Apart from Otobong Nkanga, who performed at the Tanks last month, as far as I know, you are not acquiring art by a single female artist?

CD: We are starting to look into women artists, but some of them end up in New York. And it's impossible, now, to discover these young artists because of the visa problem. Even if they are excellent, this country doesn't want them. So, generally the women feel more comfortable in New York and in Berlin, in Paris and Brussels. And because of family and the sociological structures, when you look in Africa, for women artists, you find that they are much more mobile than even the young men. In contrast, the most interesting curators are women. Like Koyo Kouoh.

LP: Do you have any expectations for the way in which this work you are doing in and around African artists will impact on Tate's audiences?

CD: I think it will have an impact because when we did the so-called “Africa Weekend” in the Tate Tanks, we saw a much younger and more diversified audience. They are the researchers, the urban cool, and also the African communities in the UK. So I can see that we speak to different audiences and I don't think that's a bad thing. What we have to do now is to raise the question, through our activities, of visas into Great Britain. Unless individuals have a million dollars, this country doesn't want them, not even the really good ones. London is going to become precarious if we close it off and put an iron curtain around it. So what we are doing at Tate is creating an awareness. So our fascination and curiosity with Africa is

now also becoming a political fact! In a matter of a few weeks [clicks fingers at me]! Isn't that amazing! [Laughs] All the things we are loading on our shoulders!

LP: Finally, in the initial press release put out by Tate about the Africa acquisitions and projects, Tate stated that Africa has no contemporary art galleries. But in fact, that's not true is it? Lagos has a gallery of contemporary art, and Nairobi, and Johannesburg and Cape Town, to name a few. Why did you write that?

CD: My God! When I gave a speech at the art fair in Johannesburg, in all the discussions I had with people everyone was complaining. They all said that no serious work is being done in terms of Kunsthallen and museums in Johannesburg. So, there are some, but very few --and most of them are private! And that's what we meant. I mean, there's a great foundation in Cotonou -- but that's the Fondation Zinsou – and there are great, great, great, museum activities going on in Nigeria, but they are GT Bank.

LP: And what's the problem with that?

CD: The problem is that there are some organisations but they are private. What we meant is to say is that we have to keep investing in all these sorts of initiatives, both private and public. But it's very, tough for them to create something that is not commercial. I know how difficult it is for Raw Material in Dakar, for example. I've been trying to look for money for them everywhere. And let's not even talk about sustainability!

LP: Are you aware of efforts to build a museum of contemporary art in Luanda, Angola?

CD: I heard vaguely about it, but then Luanda is such an odd cup of tea isn't it? It's not becoming the Paris of Africa: It's becoming the Dubai of Africa, one of the most expensive cities in the world. And I don't think the art that we defend, that we are interested in, will have a place there. I think Luanda will become “blah blah” when it continues like that. I know a lot of Angolans who say they don't want to become part of the “blah blah.”

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