Trendesign talked to Chris Dercon, director of London’s Tate Modern, about how the small-scale institutions of our region are influencing the evolution of the Tate and other progressive exhibition spaces.

The Tate group is a network of four iconic art galleries housing much of the UK’s collection of British art from the 1500s and of international modern art. Tate Britain was founded in 1897 as the National Gallery of British Art. It became the Tate Gallery in 1937 taking the name of the sugar merchant, philanthropist and avid collector of Victorian art, Sir Henry Tate, who had left his own collection of art to the country on the condition it be housed in a gallery open to all. He himself helped to fund construction of the magnificent gallery on Millbank, Westminster.

More recently, Tate Britain, as the gallery is now known, has been joined by Tate Liverpool, Tate St Ives and the most recent of the galleries, Tate Modern, which opened in 2000. Tate Modern hosts the institution’s collection of modern and contemporary art from the 1900s to the present day in the former Bankside Power Station across the River Thames from St Paul’s Cathedral.

“At the Tate you can go, you can enter, you can stay, meet people, hang out and you can look at art. It is like a public city, a place for civic imagination,” explains director Chris Dercon. “Nobody expects you to stay long but nobody is going to tell you that you have to leave either and that makes it really interesting; it doesn’t have that format. It’s really like a form of realised utopia. It’s also elitism for the masses,” he adds.

In its first year, the Tate Modern was the most popular museum in the world and it often operates at more than twice its design capacity. To meet this demand, a new development to “redefine the museum for the 21st Century” is currently underway. Slated for completion by 2016, an additional building is being constructed south of the existing gallery and will house more spaces for the collection, performance, installations and areas for learning and social interaction. Even with the works closing areas of the gallery, some 4.8 million visitors came last year to peruse the collection and temporary exhibitions, a majority of which are free to enter.
OUR REGION ON DISPLAY

Director Chris Dercon captivated audiences in Amman with his contagious passion and progressive vision as he spoke about “making the Tate more modern” in March. During his talk, at the invitation of Columbia University, he highlighted both the iconic institution’s connection to, and his personal interest, in the art of our region.

A Belgian art historian, documentary filmmaker and cultural producer, Chris joined the Tate Modern in 2011. During his tenure and in past positions at institutions including Witte de With; PS1 Museum, New York; the Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam; and curating exhibitions for the Venice Biennale and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, he has also actively worked with artists and institutions in the Middle East.

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“It’s not about ownership, it is about trying to get to know about what is happening in these regions and opening this to the public,” says Chris adding that the Tate Modern would not be what it is today without acquisitions of art from the Middle East and particularly without the exchanges and collaborations with other exhibition spaces in the region.

“The cultural production of the middle east is one of the most exciting because art is such a big field allowing for so many different forms of experiments from the psychological, to feminist positions and using language,” says Chris. “It is such an interesting regime in terms of cultural production and the artists are occupying that visual regime in so many fascinating ways.” He adds that visual art is a perfect tool from a “bottom-up” movement. In Saudi Arabia, artists work in the army or in information management or are engineers, for example. In Beirut artists are almost like documentary makers and sociologists. “It is a completely different way of thinking and that is why these new forms of civic imagination make the Middle East so incredibly rich,” he says.

Under Chris’s direction, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, presented works by Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi in Unpacking Europe (2001). This exhibition paid homage to Arab-Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi and was first shown at Amman’s Darat al Funun in Jabal al-Weibdeh. A decade later, as director of Haus der Kunst in Munich, the museum hosted an Arab art exhibition, The Future of Tradition – The Tradition of Future (2010). The following year, now leading Tate Modern, Chris again joined up with the Darat al Funun for Out of Place. This collaboration showcased at Tate Modern explored the relationship between dominant political forces and personal or collective histories. This was achieved by looking at urban spaces, architectural structures and the condition of displacement through the works of Syrian artist Hrair Sarkissian, Palestinian photographer Ahlam Shibli, Turkish visual artist Cevdet Erek and Romanian painter Ion Grigorescu.

Last year the Tate Modern showcased the world’s first major museum exhibition of Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, a pioneer of abstract art in the Middle East and a significant figure in the history of 20th Century art.

Chris also highlights Palestinian Mona Hatoum’s Untitled (Wheelchair), a piece
that could be conveying comfort or torture; Algerian-French Kader Attia's imaginative couscous village Untitled (Ghardaïa); Iranian Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar's strategic Air Pollution of Iran; and Lebanese Lamia Joreige's Objects of War testimonials as works that have been popular at the Tate Modern. “Now we have a collection of depictions of warfare, they have proved to be an amazing, thoughtful display where people can come to study how these depictions of conflicts in time were addressed by artists,” explains Chris.

“Situations in the Middle East and in other places where we see antagonism, we also feel the crest of these pressure points. They are at once local and national, global and transnational, secular and geological, regional and geopolitical. Here we see a rise in the mention of civic imagination and this is the propelling totally new cultural initiatives – totally new cultural forms and cultural techniques that go beyond the term contemporary art,” he adds.

Chris believes that the region’s history, particularly under the influence of a conservative culture when it comes to forms of visual expression, seen sometimes as a constraint on art, has crafted disciplined and incredible visual imaginations. “When you look at art from the Middle East, its vision is so incredibly precise. And that is because art was always crafted here, there was no split between deskilling and skilling like in the West. Here it’s a question of wanting to make something good, which can transform the experience of the viewer in its richness,” says Chris.
The Commuters 1972 by Romanian painter Ion Grigorescu from the Out of Place collaboration between the Tate Modern and the Darat al Funun

At one point the Tate, to the dismay of members of the art elite, replaced a work by Picasso with Sudanese visionary Ibrahim El-Salahi’s *Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams* (1961-1965). “The public, however, were saying that’s where it belongs, we get it, that’s the Picasso of Sudan,” explains Chris.

He declares Suha Shoman, founder and patron of the Darat al Funun, a place where artists can meet to exchange ideas and work rather than just a gallery, to be his hero. He also compliments Princess Wijdan Al Hashemi on Jordan’s National Gallery of Fine arts, in addition to the innovative Columbia University Studio-X Amman, for fostering talent in the Kingdom. In neighbouring countries, Chris endorses Beirut’s Ashkal Alwan and Princess Hoor al Qasimi with the Shajrah Art Foundation for promoting contemporary art practices in the Middle East – a term he is reluctant to use as it inaccurately presents both the region and its creative output as homogenous.

TEMPLES OF DELIGHT

As he impressed an audience of the Kingdom’s art community and creative arts students at the Columbia University in Amman, Chris discussed the evolution of museum patronage and how making “hard places soft” and “large spaces smaller” in a metaphoric sense will be imperative in the future.

“The new Tate Modern is not an extension but a rethinking of the whole building; the learning and social functions of the museum will be as important as the experience of art,” explains Chris. In the new wing, designed by Swiss architecture firm Herzog and de Meuron, he sees a crystal, “a form of organic growth” that is embodied by today’s patrons who seek to “programme the museum for themselves”. In Chris’s opinion the new idea of a museum is be...
Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain

a flat horizontal idea, firstly in regard to its organisational model and then becoming evident in the physical architecture. “Not just these iconic buildings from the outside, but from the inside. I am fed up with these towers,” he exclaims and one of his provocative sayings has been that he now wants to expand the museum in order to make it small.

His ideas are increasingly being reflected in the industry as it moves on from the “Bilbao effect” (Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain that was instantly hailed as the most important structure of its time and was believed to challenge assumptions about the connections between art, architecture, and collecting) and the desire to create spectacles of architecture to the detriment of “choreography”; how the museum would and could function.

Over a decade ago, Eskin Blake insightfully questioned in The Incredible Growing Art Museum, published in Art News, that “multibillion-dollar buildings transform skylines and the notion of the museum itself”, but questioned: “What does this mean for art and the audience?”

In a 2013, a special report on museums entitled Temples of Delight, The Economist reflected that “something has drastically changed in our museums – museums don’t see the public as a hindrance anymore they see the public as the content delivery of the museum”.

“The conceptual framework of the small-scale institution is an investment in the future and in our own future,” says Chris. “It is putting something into place for our communal future because these institutions give meaning to power. And this is why the Tate is now more aligned to cultural institutions like the Darat al Funun than the global art market.”
ENCOUNTERS OF A THIRD KIND
The museum is now a completely new space for encounters and has evolved from what Chris terms 1.0: a classical patronage era defined by people’s tastes and culture that only sought value rather than generated it. In 2.0, came the strategic patron – the industrialists, statesmen and oligarchs. “At this time, the target expands beyond the patron’s tastes to peruse more influence, to create more ambitious consensus policies and the choices of the patron are determined by ideological objective, often in conflict with the arts,” explains Chris. With the modern museum, 3.0 culture performs a universal human right to take the stage, it choose and fixes the conditions and as a result audience starts to expand and patrons seek many different experiences from entertainment to learning.

“We do not yet understand completely what it is but we feel that in our museums there are all these tensions between tradition versus destruction, working on-site versus online, but the most important is the spectator versus the participant,” says Chris.

The Tate Modern has observed that people are no longer flocking to the museum for just a spiritual inspiration or simply emotional aesthetic experience. “They want to find out about new systems of thinking, they want to raise issues big and small, they even want the museum to become a space in order to learn how to make good decisions and how to have ideas for good thinking,” says Chris.
The artwork of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson took centre stage on the cover of the institution’s anniversary branding and publications, Tate Modern 10 in 2010. Millions had flocked to the now-iconic The Weather Project when it was displayed for six months over 2003 to 2004. Olafur’s giant sun was installed in the purposefully misted Turbine Hall, bathing visitors – many of whom returned regularly and stayed for hours – in orange light as they became tiny black shadows under a mirrored ceiling. Chris describes the interactive installation as provoking change and a symbol for the past, present and future of the Tate Modern. “Suddenly there was no difference anymore between the producer and the receiver,” says Chris.

During his visit to Amman, Chris enjoyed spending time with creative young students, musicians and architects, locals and tourists who sipped orange juice and tea in the courtyard at the Darat at Funun. “There is a magnificent exhibition called Hiwar, which means “conversation”. “Hiwar” means you and I, it means cultural participation,” he says.

Chris reflects a great deal on the importance of cultural participation as a catalyst for innovation that is facilitated through the arts. “Culture is entrenched in the fabric of daily life. It’s a condition for welfare, for sustainability, for social cohesion for new entrepreneurship, for soft power, for local identity, for knowledge acquisition. And in the future, culture will depend less on buildings in one place and more on organisation models.”

CONTEMPORARY ART TODAY

Chris believes the innovative, concurrent streams of digital content production and digital connectivity will transform the museum furthermore. Although Tate Modern is at the forefront of using online platforms – with initiatives like Tate Live, a web broadcast of in-gallery performances, seminars and workshops – Chris asserts that the institution and, particularly the role of the curator, remain vital. “The curator is not just the selector but also the person who embeds all these objects with subjective meaning. You can look at art online, but we want you to tell us why is it important to have this art displayed in a museum in a configuration,” says Chris adding that the Tate Modern challenges you to “ask the questions Google can’t answer”.

MUSEUMS DON’T SEE THE PUBLIC AS A HINDRANCE ANYMORE