



THE MODERN MAN

How the Tate Gallery's Nicholas Serota is reinventing the museum.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

In his twenty-four years as the director of the Tate Gallery, in London, Nicholas Serota has been widely acclaimed—and often vilified—for changing the culture of Great Britain. The establishment, the press, and the numberless upright citizens who used to regard modern art as a joke, a foreign-born absurdity practiced by incompetents or charlatans, now embrace it with almost unseemly fervor. Tate Modern, the Tate's building for twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, which opened in 2000 in a derelict power station on the south side of the Thames, draws about five million visitors a year, making it the world's most heavily attended modern-art museum. Although Serota, the driving force behind Tate Modern, wouldn't think of claiming credit for this turnaround, his primary role is acknowledged by virtually all his professional colleagues. "Over the last thirty years, Nick has been by far the most important player in making the British comfortable with contemporary art, really engaged with it and eager to see it," Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, said recently. Larry Gagosian, the New York superdealer, whose global empire now has two London branches, considers Serota a master strategist. "Nick really caught the wave," Gagosian told me. "He saw the possibilities, the wealth coming in, and he kind of harnessed that. A lot of other people were involved, but to me it really looks like the house that Nick built."

On a weekday morning in March of this year, the permanent-collection galleries at Tate Modern had a festive, holiday ambience. More than half the people who come here are under thirty-five, and the average that day appeared to be even younger. They drifted around in pairs or small groups—hardly anyone was alone—chatting convivially, taking pictures of one another with their smartphones, pausing now and then to look at a work of art.

Eight schoolchildren with sketch pads sat in a semicircle around Umberto Boccioni's Futurist sculpture of a striding figure. On the opposite wall hung Roy Lichtenstein's terrific "Whaam!," with its comic-book fighter plane engulfed in a red-and-yellow explosion. There is no admission fee (the museum charges only for special exhibitions), and the young people rightly feel that the place and the art on view belong to them—even though, these days, less than forty per cent of the Tate's funding comes from the government. I mentioned this impression to Serota an hour later, when we met for lunch in the museum's top-floor restaurant. "We did a survey of about forty artists before we began this," he said, in his calmly engaging way. "We thought that if we could make spaces in which artists liked to show their work, then the public would also respond to them—we wanted spaces that the public would feel comfortable in. For example, it was a very deliberate decision to make this a good restaurant, but not a high-end one."

Serota speaks precisely, looking straight at you through rimless eyeglasses. Sixty-six years old, he is two inches over six feet tall, trim and very fit in an impeccable white shirt and dark suit. Some people find his manner headmasterish, but they're not paying attention. Everybody, even total strangers, calls him Nick. He keeps his watch set ten minutes fast, to avoid being late for appointments, and when he hears or says something funny, as he does quite often, his mouth opens wide in a soundless laugh.

From our table by a window, we could look straight across the Thames to St. Paul's Cathedral. In 1993, when the Tate's trustees were looking at sites in London for a separate museum of international modern and contemporary art, Serota knew better than to bring them to Southwark by the direct route, crossing the Thames a few miles upstream and then

navigating the choked and winding back streets. "We put everyone in a minibus after a trustee meeting, and I made the driver go along the river, on the north side, until we got to St. Paul's, which of course they all knew. We stopped there, and I had them look through a gap between buildings, where you could see this power station across the river. That gave them a better sense of it."

What they saw was a huge, glowering brick monolith with massive walls and a three-hundred-and-twenty-five-foot chimney. Designed by Giles Gilbert Scott and completed in the early nineteen-sixties, the Bankside power station had been decommissioned in 1981, when rising oil prices made it uneconomical. The surrounding area, where brothels, bearbaiting, and Shakespeare's Globe once flourished (a replica of the Globe, which opened in 1997, is visible from Tate Modern), was a manufacturing center in the nineteenth century, but the factories eventually moved elsewhere, poverty settled in, and Southwark became one of London's blighted boroughs. Scott's building had its admirers, who were trying to keep it from being torn down by developers, and in 1993 Francis Carnwath, the Tate's deputy director and also a member of the London Advisory Committee for English Heritage, was invited to visit the site—which he had been attempting to do for some time. "He came back that afternoon," Serota recalled, "and said someone there, an architectural historian, had suggested that the Tate should take it over. Francis told him it was far too big, but I asked him to describe it to me, and it sounded more and more interesting, so that night I went home via the Bankside power station. At the time, it was cut off from the river by high walls, but there was a walkway by the river, as there still is, and I stood by the chimney and paced out to the end of the building, and realized that the foot-

print was about the same as the Tate's."

A week or so later, Serota got a key and went inside. The interior, abandoned for many years, was a vast, virtually empty space for very large machinery—turbines, boilers, generators, and the like—a space, he realized, in which you could build anything you wanted, on a scale that no other site in central London could accommodate. The trustees had several possible sites on their list at the time, but when Serota brought them to Bankside he was pretty sure this was it. ("You don't witness Nick persuading people," Neil MacGregor said. "You simply see the result.") A contract to buy the power station was signed early in 1994, the year John Major's Conservative government set up the National Lottery to fund projects for the millennium. Serota's politically astute arguments—that the project could help generate the redevelopment of Southwark, just as Royal Festival Hall had done in the nineteen-fifties for the South Bank area to the west of it; and that London was the only major capital city that didn't have a museum of modern art—produced a fifty-million-pound matching grant from the lottery. "That left us with eighty-five million to raise for the building," he told me. In England, where the big museums are government-owned and funded, eighty-five million pounds was stupendously more private money than had ever been raised for such a purpose. "It was rather foolhardy to try," Serota recalled. "There were periods when I had to keep saying we were making real progress, and we weren't." The money eventually came in, though, and the Tate, a beloved but somewhat parochial institution through much of its history, became a global phenomenon.

When the Tate Gallery opened, in 1897, on the site of the old Millbank penitentiary, on the north bank of the Thames, it was to be a museum of British art. In 1917, however, the trustees of the much older National Gallery, which shows Western European painting from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries, decided that some late-nineteenth-century works were too modern for its purpose—the list included Degas, Monet, Manet, and several others—and that these, along with later examples of international modern art, would go to the Tate. Coping with this dual responsibility has never been a simple matter, considering

the long-standing British belief that art stopped with J. M. W. Turner.

Many people in the London art community thought that the Tate should show modern British art but not the foreign kind; others castigated it for doing too little about international modern art, and for virtually ignoring important British modernists such as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. The Tate either passed on or failed to acquire many important works it could have had, and when it finally started buying American Pop and minimal art, in the sixties and seventies, Britain's figurative artists complained bitterly about being marginalized. It has never really been explained why the British could accept modernism in literature, theatre, dance, and (to a lesser degree) music but not in art. The Tate's quandary over something that most Britons and many British art critics found ridiculous or offensive was not fully addressed, at any rate, until Serota came aboard, in 1988.

From his office on the ground floor of the Lodge, an annex to the original building on Millbank, Serota now oversees the operations of four museums, each of which has its own director—Tate Britain, as the first one is now called; Tate Modern; Tate Liverpool, which opened just before he took over; and Tate St. Ives, in Cornwall. Anyone walking by can look through the window and see him at his desk, in a small, austere room whose only decoration, when I met him there the morning after our lunch in March, was a pair of framed prints by the late Richard Hamilton. Serota and his cheerfully overworked staff were in the final stages of planning the Tate's program for the Cultural Olympiad, an ambitious series of arts events to complement this summer's Olympic Games, in London. Among the events still to come were Damien Hirst's first major retrospective exhibition, opening on April 4th, at Tate Modern, and, on July 18th, the public debut of two huge, circular spaces that once housed the power plant's oil tanks. The new areas will be used for live performances, large installations, and films, and their opening completes the first stage of Tate Modern's two-hundred-and-fifteen-million-pound expansion program, to be completed by 2016.

I asked Serota the obvious question: Why does Tate Modern need to get bigger? "For several reasons," he replied. The

sleeves of his white shirt were neatly rolled up, his jacket slung over a chair. "First, we have five million visitors in a building that was designed for two, and we need more space and also different kinds of spaces—for example, the raw, industrial spaces which so many artists prefer to use now." Like other decisions here, this reflects Serota's artist-centered approach. Few museums anticipated the proliferation of large-scale installations or the rapid growth of live and filmed performance work by artists during the past decade, and Tate Modern has now positioned itself as a primary showcase for these trends. One of the reasons the Swiss architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron won the competition to convert Bankside, Serota told me, was that they seemed to have the closest sympathy with artists. (They are also doing the expansion.) Other architects had wanted to fill the immense space now known as Turbine Hall with floors and partitions, but Herzog and de Meuron proposed leaving it empty—as an entrance to the building, and as a huge, new kind of exhibition space that artists would figure out how to use.

There is much talk these days about the changing role of museums in world culture. The opening of the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, in 1977, had shown that fresh approaches to the museum experience could attract a much bigger, younger, and more varied museum audience. In the years since then, an all-encompassing, media-based popular culture has eroded the reverential attitude that people used to have toward museums, and the new electronic media are changing the ways we process information. "The museum is becoming something else, and we don't know what it is yet," Chris Dercon, the current director of Tate Modern, said to me. "The main problem is what to expect from these audiences, which are larger and larger, and have different demands. We want to make sure they can talk back to us." Instead of passively accepting the interpretations of curators and other expert authorities, as Serota puts it, "people have got used to pulling stuff off the Web and assembling their own picture of the world. I think they're looking for a more interactive experience at museums. We have many more people than we'd anticipated who want to hear lectures and ask questions, or just spend time here, looking at art, buying a book, having coffee with a friend. Of course, there has to be

an underlying feeling that you will experience great art. If we don't put on great exhibitions, people don't come."

At this point, we might ask how Nick Serota, with his innate shyness and reserve, became such a master of public persuasion. He was born in 1946, and he and his younger sister, Judith, grew up in

Christ's College in Cambridge, where he went in 1965 to study economics, his growing interest in the visual arts led him to a remarkable teacher in the art-history department named Michael Jaffe, a Rubens specialist who eventually became the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum there. "Jaffe was a connoisseur rather than a theoretician," Serota recalled. "He cared pas-

lery, in London's East End, where a venturesome director named Bryan Robertson showed emerging British artists and imported exhibitions of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The Whitechapel and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in a space off Piccadilly, along with two or three commercial galleries, were the only places in London to see recent art, which most of the London reviewers could be counted on to mock and revile.

After graduating from Cambridge, in 1968, Serota took some time off before his postgraduate studies, at the Courtauld Institute. He joined a newly organized group called Young Friends of the Tate, and promptly became its chairman. "The Young Friends didn't last very long," he recalled. "We began running workshops for disadvantaged people across the river, and got some young artists and art students to make shows. The Tate's trustees were anxious that they might be seen as endorsing these shows. They said we must cease, and we all resigned." At the Courtauld, his adviser suggested that he do his graduate thesis on William Blake's engraver. Serota said that he would rather write a minor piece on a major artist than vice versa, and that he really wanted to work on Turner—"specifically on his visits to the Alps at different times in his life." He spent six months researching the drawings from those periods, and the artist's various itineraries. It was not, one gathers, an entirely happy experience. "A Turner scholar later told me that some of the things I had discovered were not quite right," he said. "That was as close to academe as I ever got."

In 1970, he went to work for the Arts Council of Great Britain, a government-funded body that supports cultural groups throughout the country. The council had leased the Hayward Gallery, on the South Bank, as its London showroom, and in 1971 Serota was assigned to help David Sylvester, an acutely perceptive writer and critic, install a show of Miró sculptures there. "Working with David," Serota said, "was a pretty special experience. I learned not to use a tape measure when installing, for starters. Use your eye." Serota helped install several more shows at the Hayward, and this is where he met Angela Beveridge, a former dancer with the Royal Ballet. She was running the bookstore, and trying to re-start her life after a serious foot injury and the two gruelling operations it



Damien Hirst's "Mother and Child Divided," in Tate Modern's Hirst retrospective.

Hampstead, in North London. Their father, Stanley Serota, was a civil engineer, the son of a Jewish cabinetmaker who had immigrated from Russia in 1912. Beatrice Serota, Stanley's wife, was a committed and vigorous politician, whose service on various local government councils led, in 1967, to her being named to the House of Lords, with the title of Baroness Serota. (Life peerages were introduced in Britain in 1958; until then, the honor had been hereditary.) A year later, she became Minister of Health in Harold Wilson's government. The historian Simon Schama, whose mother knew Beatrice well, remembers her as "a real figure in the Labour end of Anglo-Jewish eminences, a world that was very important in Britain and London." Serota concedes that it caused his mother "some heartache that I apparently gave up interest in the things that were dearest to her heart."

He had thought about a political career, when he was head boy and captain of the rugby team at Haberdashers' Aske's day school, just north of London, but at

sionately about looking, and attending to what you see." In Serota's second year at Cambridge, he switched from economics to art history. "I had no idea where it would take me, but I thought if I spent two years with art history it would probably stay with me in one way or another for the rest of my life, and I'd end up with a degree that I could apply to a whole range of disciplines. Fortunately, it didn't just stay with me; it got hold of me."

Although Italian Renaissance painting was the main focus of his Cambridge years, Serota found himself becoming more and more interested in modern and contemporary art. Both were pretty much off the map in Cambridge, and barely detectable in London. Serota spent many hours in the Cambridge home of Jim and Helen Ede, a retired couple whose modest collection of works by Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, and other British modernists gave him his first sense of how works of art could charge and dominate the space around them. He began making frequent visits to the Whitechapel Gal-

required had ended her ballet career. “Nick was tall and thin,” she remembers, “with quite long golden hair, rather Caravaggio-looking. Incredibly shy and said so little—he didn’t communicate easily.”

They got married in 1973, and moved to Oxford, where Serota had been named director of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art. It had no connection to the university. The funding was inadequate, and the rented premises were in bad shape. The Serotas, with help from an undergraduate volunteer, Sandy Nairne, who stayed on after graduation to become a poorly paid assistant director, spent the first few weeks repainting the interior themselves, and sewing together sisal mats to cover the floor. “Art became my new way of life,” Angela remembers. “I had such an intuitive belief in Nick’s vision and his gift.”

Minimal art appealed very strongly to Serota. “It was the art I first felt a real identification with,” he said. “It was about taking art out of the studio and into the world.” At Oxford, Serota and his small staff presented difficult, austere art by the American minimalists Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and Dan Flavin. They also did the first retrospective exhibition of paintings by Britain’s Howard Hodgkin, and a major show of drawings by Joseph Beuys, the German artist and teacher, whose shamanistic alchemy of painting, sculpture, performance, sociol-

ogy, and politics was virtually unknown in England at the time. People came out from London to see the shows they were doing, and Serota, whose success in developing such a complex and ambitious program had more or less done away with his reticence, started to be talked about in the London art world. When the director’s job at the publicly funded Whitechapel Gallery was offered to him, in 1976, he was ready for it.

In his twelve years at the Whitechapel, Serota challenged, electrified, and infuriated the London art world in about equal measure. Three directors had come and gone since Bryan Robertson left, in 1969, and the Whitechapel had been more or less supplanted by the Hayward and the I.C.A. as a place to see cutting-edge art. Serota’s exhibitions, many of which he curated and installed himself, changed all that. He introduced his audience to the German neo-expressionists Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz—at a time when all things German were still anathema to the English—and showed minimalist and postmodern American artists (Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse) and a host of British nonconformists, including the duo Gilbert and George. The London critics condemned virtually all of it. “There were people who just hated Nick,” Richard Dormant, a longtime critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, told me. “And the forces of reaction then were very, very

powerful.” Brian Sewell, the *Evening Standard*’s reigning reactionary, identified what he called “the Serota tendency,” which was to support any form of what Sewell considered pseudo art (conceptual, video, performance, installation) at the expense of traditional painting and sculpture. In 1981, though, when Serota teamed with Norman Rosenthal and Christos M. Joachimedes to organize an exhibition called “A New Spirit in Painting,” at the Royal Academy, with works by thirty-eight artists, including Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, and Gerhard Richter, the critical outcry was near-apoplectic. “Only the sheer scale of its triviality is breathtaking,” the *Sunday Times*’ Marina Vaizey complained, and Bernard Levin, the *Times*’ critic, advised readers that “if you really want to know why most of the population would never dream of entering an art gallery you will find the answer roughly half-way along Piccadilly on the northern side.” Sewell and others thought Serota was out to destroy British culture. They were right to worry, because his Whitechapel shows drew larger and larger crowds, and had an immediate impact on London’s art schools. Seeing Philip Guston’s late paintings at the Whitechapel in 1982 was a game-changer for Peter Doig, a student at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design at the time. “No one in my generation knew that work,” he said, “and all of a sudden here was this older artist doing great, great painting. It was like catching a bad rash—we called it the Guston rash. Seemed funny at the time, but that was the power of those exhibitions.”

Sheena Wagstaff, who had worked for Serota at Oxford, joined his staff at the Whitechapel in 1980. “Nick was very focussed and very ambitious,” she said. “He was also very clever at getting the best out of his team, by being consciously counter-intuitive. He’d throw out a provocative statement, and then reverse one hundred eighty degrees and throw out another one. He nurtured and encouraged critical thinking, and of course he was totally in control.” In those years, the Serotas and their two young daughters lived in a tiny flat in Hampstead. “I was like a single mother with Anya and Beth,” Angela said last spring, “because of what was happening with Nick. We had very little money, and he was working long, long hours, and



travelling a great deal. He was a wonderful, loving father to both the girls, but a rather long-distance one."

The Whitechapel was physically falling apart—water pouring in from roof leaks with every rainstorm—and in 1984 Serota closed it down for a complete renovation. The work took more than a year. During that period, Serota addressed the gallery's nonexistent endowment by organizing an auction of works by contemporary artists. Every artist he approached came through with a significant work, and the auction, in 1987, raised £1.3 million. This triumph was certainly known to the trustees of the Tate when they began, three months later, to interview prospective candidates for the director's job there. (The short list included Serota; Norman Rosenthal, the exhibitions secretary at the Royal Academy; and John Elderfield, the director of the Department of Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) "Do I think that was the reason I got the job?" Serota asked me. "I hope not. But it certainly made the trustees aware that I was prepared to get my hands dirty, so it probably helped. Of course it did."

What impressed the trustees even more was Serota's seven-year plan for the Tate, which he and the other candidates had been asked to submit. Serota laid out the steps to be taken with clarity, boldness, and concision, single-spaced on two sides of an A4 sheet of paper (the standard European size, slightly longer than the American), under the title "Grasping the Nettle." The paper's conclusion read, in part, "The Tate is loved, but not sufficiently respected."

Moving from the Whitechapel to a national institution, where he would be subject to changing moods and policies in Whitehall, was never a problem for Serota, whose mother had been so committed to public service. His critics in the press were predictably appalled. Peter Fuller, the editor of *Modern Painters*, warned that Serota had "neither the experience, nor . . . the inclination" to maintain a collection of British and modern art.

Nine months elapsed between his appointment, in 1987, and his taking office, in 1988, and during that time, Serota told me, Alan Bowness, the outgoing director, refused to let him have any contact with the staff. "Alan said, 'You'll come to see me once a month,'" Serota recalls, "and

I'll tell you what's happening.'" According to Bowness, "It was just normal practice at the time for him to have contact with the director, not with the staff." Bowness, who was the son-in-law of the artist Barbara Hepworth, actually liked modern art and had done what he could to build the Tate's modern collection. Some of his trustees were frustrated, however, by his traditionalist attitude toward outside fund-raising. Bowness believed it was the government's job to support the Tate and other museums, as it always had. The Tate's purchase grant under the Thatcher government was the same as it had been in 1981, though, and with art prices rising inexorably, several board members wanted to go after funds from corporate and private sources. One of them, the property developer Peter Palumbo, had criticized the Tate's administration in a newspaper interview. Bowness had threatened to resign, and a lot of bad feeling had built up. The trustees could have asked him to stay on after he reached retirement age, at sixty, but they didn't.

When Serota took over, in September, 1988, he was forty-two, one of the youngest directors in the Tate's history. One month earlier, a second-year art student at Goldsmiths College named Damien Hirst had organized an exhibition of work by himself and his fellow-students in an abandoned warehouse on the London docks. Hirst, a born entrepreneur, talked Serota, Norman Rosenthal, and other key people into seeing the show, taking them there himself in a taxi. "Nick said, 'I don't need a taxi,'" Hirst told me in March. (Serota usually prefers to take the Underground.) "He came and looked round the show, and said, 'I'm sure I'll be seeing you again.'" The exhibition, called "Freeze," marked the debut of the Young British Artists, or Y.B.A.s, as they were soon known, whose impact on the London art scene would be roughly comparable to that of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones on the music world twenty years earlier. For the first time ever, new British art—epitomized in the public mind in 1992 by Hirst's fourteen-foot tiger shark in a tank of formaldehyde—became internationally famous.

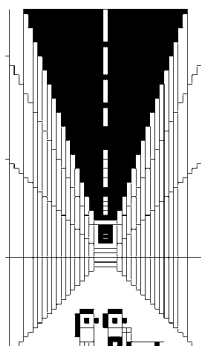
In his first week at the Tate, Serota gave a big party for artists—clear notice

that the museum would be showing more contemporary work. He also called a meeting of all the "keepers," as English curators were called then, and did something that Frances Morris, who had joined the Tate a few months before his appointment, found extraordinary. "We sat at a table, and he asked if anyone had a project they would like to do. Before, most exhibitions here were proposed

by outside curators and then worked on by a special exhibitions team. After Nick came, we all started making exhibitions. The Tate became a much more open place. We were more ready to question what we did, and to take risks." One of the early risks was deciding to rehang the permanent collection. There would be periodic rehanging, Serota

said; museums should offer "a series of arguments, rather than simply a collection of pictures."

Curators found themselves working much more directly with living artists. For the time being, though, Serota was in no haste to engage with Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Marc Quinn, and the other Y.B.A.s. Charles Saatchi, a major collector and advertising mogul whose public-relations services helped Margaret Thatcher win the 1979 election, had sold his collection of avant-garde, mostly American art after the stock-market crash in 1989, and started buying work by the Freeze generation. He put up the money for Hirst to make his first shark sculpture, and showed it in 1992 at his gallery, on Boundary Road in St. John's Wood—a former paint factory, imaginatively redesigned by the architect Max Gordon, which had become London's premier showcase for contemporary art. Saatchi had a great eye, and a reputation for manipulating the art market. A few years earlier, under Bowness, the Tate had been heavily criticized for doing shows on the American artists Julian Schnabel and Jennifer Bartlett in which many of the works were borrowed from Saatchi—works that would gain in value because of being shown at the Tate. For that reason, according to Serota, "the Tate was not as active in promoting the Y.B.A.s as we might have been." In 1995, however, a jury chaired by Serota gave Hirst the Turner Prize (he had been short-listed



for it three years earlier), and in 1996 the Tate acquired his “Pharmacy,” a room-size installation of colorfully stocked medical cabinets. Most of the Y.B.A.s are well represented there now, and Hirst’s current retrospective, at Tate Modern, has been drawing four thousand visitors a day—along with the usual complement of scathing reviews. “I have no doubt at all that Hirst’s early work is very important,” Serota told me in May. “Time will tell whether it survives, but I believe it will.”

The bias against contemporary art was breaking down, and the Tate had become an active force in the new cultural climate. Dennis Stevenson, the chairman of its board of trustees, was just a year older than Serota. A Scottish-born entrepreneur with a gift for imaginative thinking, he had joined the board in 1989 and was simultaneously named its chairman, but Margaret Thatcher, who didn’t care for his leftist views, rejected the appointment. (Government approval is required for Tate board members.) That weekend, Serota spoke to one of his trustees, who had a word with Tim Bell, Thatcher’s media adviser. Bell told the P.M., not quite truthfully, that Stevenson’s views had “mellowed,” and also suggested that having him chair the Tate might keep him off other, more powerful boards. On Monday, Serota was notified that Thatcher had withdrawn her veto. “That was one of the best things I’ve ever done for the Tate,” Serota told me. Stevenson worked to strengthen Serota’s authority vis-à-vis the board, especially regarding acquisitions, and their close working relationship with Alex Beard, the Tate’s young financial director, turned the Tate into a modern institution. “The Tate became a much better run, better organized Tate,” Stevenson told me. “Nick is very brave in doing what he thinks is right. He wasn’t naturally good at asking for money, but he’s grown much better at that.”

Faced by rising costs, skyrocketing art prices, and stagnant or declining government support, the Tate and other museums were turning to the private sector. “Initially, we went after corporations, to sponsor exhibitions and other projects,” Serota told me, “but when it came to the capital campaign for Tate Modern it had to be from individuals and foundations.” Britain, unlike the United States, does not

THE LETTERS OF GEORGE KENNAN AND JOHN LUKACS, INTERSPERSED WITH SOME OF MY DREAMS

You asked me about myself. In May
I remarried, three and a half years
after I had lost my unique wife.

Depression, at least in my case,
has much to do with my physical
and psychic state of the moment.

My words are carved on gravel stones, each about the size
of an oyster, and must be fed in the proper sequence
into a gadget like a water gun.

Those striking lines from John Donne correspond
exactly with something that I read
by Kierkegaard

some time ago: in which he says that Truth
is given to God alone: but what is given to us
is the pursuit of truth.

My gravel words drift slowly through the water
toward a sort of muzzle that spits them out,
and that is how I speak.

For the second time, I am blessed in having found
a charming, warm-hearted, intelligent woman,
sparkling with *esprit*.

In a Pennsylvania town the bedframes are made of iron,
the dolls are still porcelain, and the trolleys
pulled by long lines of white horses in single file.

It is a rainy Sunday morning, and I have asked our guests
to excuse me while I do some writing. I, too,
sense the imminent arrival of great calamities.

allow most individuals to take tax write-offs for gifts to museums. However, the institution can reclaim the tax paid on the donated amount, substantially increasing the value of the gift. Serota and Stevenson, working together “like a couple of pirates,” as Angela described it, made very effective use of this provision. “A significant proportion of the eighty-five million pounds we raised for Tate Modern came from foundations and trusts established by very rich people—Sainsburys, Westons, Vivien Duffield,” Serota told me.

Following his own recommendations in “Grasping the Nettle,” Serota competed, much more aggressively than his predecessors had, for works of modern

and contemporary art. He brought in key works by Joseph Beuys, Lucian Freud, Gerhard Richter, Richard Serra, Francis Bacon, David Hockney, and Damien Hirst, many of them by donation, and he led a fund drive in 2007 that raised £4.95 million for Turner’s late watercolor “The Blue Rigi,” an acknowledged masterpiece that would have left the country if the drive had failed. Shortly before Tate Modern opened, Serota asked Charles Saatchi to consider giving it ten important works from his own collection. Saatchi countered with an offer of eighty works, “only one or two of which,” as Serota described them to me, “you, today, would recognize.” Serota and some members of

I look down and see through my skin
to the infant inside: he grows horns on his head
but my seeing it makes them go away.

The arrival of the letter found me in a state of comparable
despair.
Being essentially a healthy person I recover
by indulgence in the little satisfactions of the moment.

My room has a terrace that looks down on steep hillsides
dropping to the sea, like a Bruegel. As I admire the view
a bay horse clops across the road.

This state of mind came in part from personal reasons,
notably the realization of my failure to bring about
a better understanding of nuclear weaponry and Soviet-
American relations.

The horse chain has broken in several places
and it is my job to hitch a number of white horses
to other white horses.

No one knows what will be left when this process
of disintegration has been halted—
possibly only the Russian heartland.

Deer outside my window in Manhattan,
and woods, and a girl on a horse, and then
snow begins to fall in thick, slow clumps:

this, it seems to me, is what I'd hoped for
so I grab my camera,
intending to send you the picture.

—*Jana Prikryl*

his board considered this a transparent effort to make the Tate validate his judgment. The board turned him down, and Saatchi, who declined to be interviewed by me, is reported to have gone around afterward saying that he'd offered his collection to the Tate and the Tate had refused it. His name and his signal achievement as an art patron, which Serota and many others had hoped to make a significant part of Tate Modern, are nowhere in evidence there today.

Serota has somehow found time—except during the frantic years leading up to Tate Modern's opening—to organize and co-curate shows at Tate Britain or at Tate Modern by Donald Judd, Cy

Twombly, Howard Hodgkin, Gerhard Richter, and several other artists. "There are things I don't do," he told me, "so that I can go on being a curator." It's hard to imagine what those things are. He spends at least two-thirds of his time on administration and fund-raising, by his own estimate. Although the Tate now gets sixty per cent of its funds from private sources, ticket sales for exhibitions, and other means, it must still negotiate with government politicians for the rest. He has dealt with five different Prime Ministers. "You tend to use different arguments," Serota explained. "Mrs. Thatcher was very keen on an entrepreneurial attitude, and bringing in private

money. Tony Blair's government was more interested in access and education. Our public funding increased a little from 1997 to about 2003, but since then all the national museums have been cut back, and we have to make it up in private funds, or cut our program a bit."

The only thing he's given up, so far as I can see, is being chairman of the Turner Prize jury. (Since 2007, it has been chaired by the director of Tate Britain or Tate Liverpool.) The Turner Prize was established by Bowness in 1984, as an annual award given by the Tate for achievement in the arts during the previous year, and at first it could go to writers, critics, and museum curators as well as to artists. Nobody paid much attention to it until 1991, when Serota persuaded his fellow-jurors to limit it to artists who were under fifty, either British or working in Britain—whereupon the press began treating it as a major and hugely controversial news event. The anti-Serota press brigade erupted in rage when Rachel Whiteread won it, in 1993, and even more so when it went to Damien Hirst. Serota was damned as the mastermind, the "Trotsky of the arts" under whom, in Brian Sewell's enriched prose, "the Prize descends to the intellectual level of a freak show in a circus, and drags with it all the arts of western civilisation." The annual Turner Prize commotion, needless to say, has done much to promote interest in contemporary art.

A month before Damien Hirst's retrospective opened at Tate Modern, in early April, hundreds of his spot paintings filled all eleven Gagosian galleries worldwide, including the two in London. Gagosian gave a party for Hirst at the Arts Club on Dover Street, and invited an eclectic mix of artists, dealers, and big-money types, along with the sort of upper-class socialites who now want to be associated with contemporary art—people like David Cholmondely, the current Great Chamberlain, who walks backward before the Queen when she opens Parliament. Serota was there, after a full day that included speaking at a memorial for Lucian Freud, who died last July. Serota excels at this sort of thing. He went off by himself, on the morning of the event, and wrote a brief, evocative, highly personal tribute that compared Freud to "a bantam prize fighter in training—nippy, sinewy, always

somehow poised for action.” At the Arts Club that evening, I sat down with Serota at a table in the back room where Gagosian was entertaining Simon and Joyce Reuben, wealthy British collectors. Gagosian jokingly told Simon Reuben that Serota needed fifty million pounds to complete the Tate Modern’s expansion project, and that Reuben should sell his boat and give it to him. “You can have your name on an oil tank,” he added. Serota said, “You’ll be known long after Larry is forgotten.”

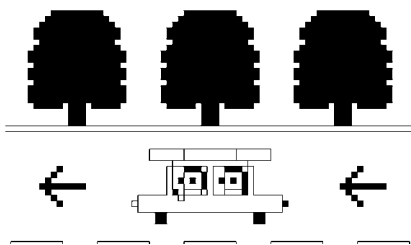
Serota lives with his second wife, Teresa Gleadowe, in a small, cozy house in King’s Cross, North London. They have known each other since 1969, when she was reading art history at Cambridge and he was doing research there for his graduate thesis on Turner. Their paths crossed occasionally in later years, during which Teresa married, had two children (both girls, like his), and held several arts-related jobs. In the early nineties, she was the Tate’s head of information, before moving to the Royal College of Art to lead its new program to train curators. Their previous marriages were ending by that time, and in 1997 Nick and Teresa were married. There was no number on their front door when I came by for afternoon tea—Teresa had pencilled a “9” on a piece of paper and taped it to the doorframe. Inside, the pictures on the walls were mostly prints or drawings or photographs by contemporary artists, some British and some not, all carefully chosen, but not for their commercial value. “We don’t really buy art,” Serota said.

Serota’s friends agree that he has never had any interest in making money. His salary at the Tate for each of the past five years has been about a hundred and sixty thousand pounds, or around two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars—at the upper level of civil-service rates in the U.K. but far below what he could expect at any large museum in the U.S. (In 1994, he was asked whether he would be willing to talk with the trustees of the Museum of Modern Art about the director’s job there; he said no.) At six-forty-five every morning, he gets up and runs two miles, on the sidewalks in their neighborhood. When I mentioned to Teresa what his old friend and colleague Sandy Nairne had told me, that “nobody’s ever seen him run,” she laughed

and said, “It’s true—pretty much including me.” They have a small vacation house by the sea in Cornwall, where Teresa spent summers when she was growing up. Both of them like sailing, but they don’t own a boat. “He’s a very good sailor,” Teresa had told me earlier in the week, “although in certain circumstances I think I do some things better. When the wind is light and fluky, I can feel it better than he can. He gets exasperated. He wants to get on with it!”

The inauguration of Tate Modern, on May 11, 2000, was an all-day event. The Queen came in the morning, and appeared, to many of her subjects, unusually grumpy. “She got up on the platform in a mint-green dress and a matching hat, said, ‘I declare the Tate Modern open,’ and that was it,” according to one Tate staffer. Serota concedes that the monarch did not appear to enjoy herself. “When she opened the Great Court at the British Museum, a few months later,” he said, “she spoke for about ten or fifteen minutes about the virtues of the British Museum. On the other hand, she came. She didn’t bring the Duke of Edinburgh. I saw him about two weeks earlier, and he made it clear that he would not be coming.”

Thousands of people came to the public opening, the next day, and their reaction was quite different. “From the very first day, people were crazy about it,” I was told by Michael Craig-Martin, an



artist who had been one of Serota’s first appointments to the Tate board as an artist-trustee. “Ordinary people felt very welcome. And there was this great thing—museums had been free in Britain for ages, but when Tate Modern opened there was all this in the press about how you can go and see this new wonder and it was absolutely free.” “Now that White Van Man has approved London’s new Tate Gallery,” the *Sum* proclaimed, “it has the official blessing of the people”—deliv-

erymen who drive white vans being the paper’s current metaphor for working-class guys.

The crowds came, and kept on coming—5.2 million the first year. Serota and his team had planned for about two million, with a sharp drop after that, but attendance dropped only to 4.2 million the second year and then came right back, and it’s hovered around five million ever since. (By comparison, the Museum of Modern Art, which charges for admission, gets about three million.) “There was a difficult period after the opening,” Serota said. “Everyone was exhausted, and not quite sure what they’d got hold of with this monster child that was eating us.” Lars Nittve, a soft-spoken Swede whom Serota had recruited in 1998 as Tate Modern’s first director, left in 2001 to direct the Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, and for nearly two years Serota was the acting director—while continuing to supervise the three other Tates. He continued to work very closely with two people he had known and trusted since his days at the Oxford Museum: Sheena Wagstaff, who moved from Tate Britain to Tate Modern in 2001, to become its director of exhibitions; and Sandy Nairne, who since 1994 had been deeply involved in planning and structuring the new museum. Nairne had wanted to be the director of Tate Modern, but he didn’t get the job, and in 2002 he left to become the director of the National Portrait Gallery. Vicente Todolí, a brilliant and indefatigable Spaniard, was Tate Modern’s director from 2003 to 2010; he is a curator at heart, he said, and he left because he had other things he wanted to do. The current incumbent, Chris Dercon, is a Belgian. Serota sought them all out, talked them into applying for the job, and made sure they got it; although bureaucratic regulations were followed, Serota usually manages to get the people he wants. He is not threatened by strong associates, because there is never any question about who is really in control. The trustees have renewed Serota’s tenure twice, at seven-year intervals. When his third term came up for renewal, they decided to make it permanent. He could keep going for another ten years, or more.

Serota eludes the hero’s aura that his admirers try to attach to him these days. He knows that what he’s done at the Tate

(and, earlier, at the Whitechapel) is part of a larger story, which is London's revival as a great international city. "It's hard to remember how depressing London was in the seventies and eighties," Richard Rogers, the architect, who was chairman of the Tate board that chose Serota, said to me recently. "When I was doing the Lloyd's insurance building, in 1980, people were saying businesses should move to Frankfurt, which was like the capital of Europe. It shows how far London has come back, and art was part of that." London now vies with New York as a marketplace for modern and contemporary art, and this has attracted swarms of new-rich Russian oligarchs and Middle Eastern sheikhs and sheikas, and brought in artists from all over the world. One of Serota's outreach programs has been to form acquisitions committees in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and to hire curators with expert knowledge in those areas. The Museum of Modern Art has run a similar program in Latin America for many years, but the Tate's is global. The modern-art canon that Alfred Barr established at MOMA, and which was focussed on the art of Western and Central Europe, Russia, Great Britain, the United States, and not much else, has expanded immeasurably, and so have our ways of using and looking at art.

In the past century, three museums have managed not just to reflect but to shape the visual culture of an era—the Museum of Modern Art, in the nineteen-thirties; the Centre Pompidou, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties; and Tate Modern today. John Elderfield, the greatly respected, British-born scholar who recently joined the Gagosian Gallery after many years at MOMA, believes that what's happened at Tate Modern is "a really radical change in how people use museums now. It's not only about looking closely at works of art; it's moving around within a sort of cultural spectacle. I have friends who think this is the end of civilization, but a lot more people are going to be in the presence of art, and some of them will look at things and be transported by them."

For students and young Londoners in their twenties or thirties, the members' room at Tate Modern is one of the cooler places to hang out on Friday and Saturday evenings, when the museum stays open until 10 P.M. The museum as a so-



"U txtn 2 me?"

cial environment, where people interact with art and with one another on their own terms, and create their own experiences, might seem to work against the close study of individual works that Serota learned from Michael Jaffe, at Cambridge. "One criticism of this building is that you can't have an intimate experience with a work of art," Serota conceded. "That's something we are going to address in the new building, where we'll have some smaller galleries, for photographs and modestly scaled works. But, if you come here at ten or eleven on a weekday morning, you can still have that experience." As a populist, artist-centered institution, though, Tate Modern is also responding to viewers who want to engage with art on a more active level than contemplation, and it is learning how to do this as it goes along. Comparing Tate Modern to MOMA, Massimiliano Gioni, the young chief curator of the New Museum, in New York, told me, "It's not pedantic, and it doesn't feel like they hold the truth in their hands."

Much of the art being made today encourages or requires its viewers to become part of it, in one way or another. More than two million of them re-

sponded with near-ecstatic delight to "The Weather Project," an installation in Turbine Hall in 2003, basking for hours at a time in the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's changing simulacrum of golden sunrise (from two hundred yellow sodium lights and their reflection in mirrored ceiling panels) and a soft mist that was piped into the five-hundred-foot-long space. "In Turbine Hall," Sheena Wagstaff told me, "you have artists working in a kind of space they've never encountered before, where even they don't know what the effect on the audience will be." Listening closely to artists has always been the real Serota tendency, at any rate, and it seems to be spreading. Last month, Wagstaff left the Tate, to head the twentieth- and twenty-first-century departments at the Metropolitan Museum, in New York. This was a blow to Serota, who will miss her deeply, but a few days later he told her it was the right move. At this point in his career, he can only be magnanimous. When I asked him whether he ever missed the vituperative attacks he used to get from London's art critics, he thought for a moment, laughed soundlessly, and said, "I have forgiven them all." ♦