



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to present the insignia  
of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur*  
to Sir Nicholas Serota  
and of *Officier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*  
to Chris Dercon

London, 4 July 2012

*Cher Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate gallery network,*

*Cher Chris Dercon, Director of Tate Modern,*

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

It's a great honour for me, and for all of us gathered here today, to welcome to the French Residence two great figures, Sir Nicholas Serota and Mr Chris Dercon, together with their families, friends and colleagues.

It's a solemn moment for anyone who has dedicated their life to bringing the arts to the greatest number of people to be awarded the insignia of our orders of distinction: the *Ordre de la Légion d'honneur* – created by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to reward the exceptional services rendered by its recipient to the French nation – and the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, created by the Fourth Republic and maintained by General de Gaulle and which, in the words of André Malraux, is “respected and coveted by artists, writers and all creative professionals”. By these distinctions, France today honours two men who have served the cause of artistic creation to which our country is so committed.

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*Cher Sir Nicholas,*

It's a great pleasure for me to present you today with the insignia of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre de la Légion d'honneur*, after you were appointed to the rank of *Officier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2004.

Allow me to pay tribute to your brilliant career by highlighting to everyone why you are a worthy candidate for our most prestigious national order.

You were born in London and grew up in Hampstead, in a family where you no doubt acquired both a taste for technical perfection – your father Stanley was a civil engineer – and your sense of social commitment: your mother Beatrice was, among other things, a minister in Harold Wilson’s Labour cabinet, before becoming Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords. “The values that I learned from my family”, you’ve said, “undoubtedly play a huge part in what I do and the way I try to do it. I work in an institution that is here to serve the public.”

A brilliant pupil, you were admitted to Christ’s College, Cambridge, and began by following your mother’s example by studying economics. As you’ve recalled, she wasn’t immediately overjoyed when you abandoned this discipline to turn towards the history of art. No doubt she was afraid such a choice might distance you from the family ambition to contribute to changes in society (your subsequent career has doubtless more than reassured her on that point!). Be that as it may, you then undertook a Masters degree in art history at the prestigious Courtauld Institute. Your thesis, under the supervision of Michael Kitson and Anita Brookner, was on Turner: to be precise, “J.M.W. Turner’s Alpine Tours”. It strikes me as revealing that you chose to study the most quintessential, most modern British artist, but to view him in relation with the European continent, which he visited for the first time after the Treaty of Amiens.

Even before attending your viva, you’d begun your career as an “artistic agitator” by becoming leader of the Young Friends of the Tate in 1969. With the Young Friends you organized your own lecture programme and exhibitions, not without arousing the perplexity

and even concern of the museum's then trustees, who discouraged you from pursuing these activities, which were rightly seen as revolutionary. In 1973, at the age of just 27, you were appointed Director of Oxford's Museum of Modern Art.

In 1976 you were appointed Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, which you ran for 12 years. There you enabled the British public to discover great figures in contemporary art like Anselm Kieffer, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz and Eva Hesse. In 1984 you took the brave decision to close the museum for a year to carry out an ambitious extension and refurbishment programme, which gave the building the modern, welcoming appearance we're familiar with today. Moreover, you succeeded in raising a large part of the museum's funding in 1987 through a sale of contemporary works kindly donated by artists at your request.

Sir Nicholas, this remarkable career had already revealed both your love of artists from all corners of the globe, your determination to introduce them to as wide a public as possible – despite the criticisms of Philistines always quick to gibe at novelty in art – and, finally, your ability to raise funds and ensure you had the resources to pursue your ambitions. It earned you, in 1988, the post of Director of Tate, one of the world's most influential museum networks.

That year you were appointed to run the flagship museum of British artistic life, following a selection procedure in which you and the other candidates had been asked to draw up a seven-year development plan. Your vision was based on a modernization of the Tate's management, in the context of dwindling public subsidies during the Thatcher era; a determination not to separate modern from contemporary art, pursuing an ambitious acquisitions and exhibitions policy; a commitment to show the collections more widely by

broadening the Tate network – Tate Liverpool opened in 1988, Tate St Ives in 1993 and of course Tate Modern in 2000, following the conversion of the old Bankside Power Station, partly funded by National Lottery money and above all thanks to an exceptional fundraising campaign begun under your leadership.

Tate Modern's success is extraordinary. With more than five million visitors a year, it's quite simply the most visited modern art museum in the world. In 12 years, the museum has established itself as an icon of the London cityscape and helped revitalize the metropolis's image. It's also radically changed our idea of museology and the social role of cultural institutions. It's still a permanent laboratory and building site, as shown in particular by the imminent opening of the "oil tanks", spaces in the museum's basement that will be dedicated to live art installation and performance. In addition, you've embarked on a spectacular project to extend the museum. "Art changes", you've said: "the way the public interact with works of art has indisputably changed. And this extension project reflects those changes."

But you're not only an empire-builder. You remain a curator of exhibitions, like "Gerhard Richter: Panorama" last year, and you consider this activity – which few directors of large museums still carry out in practice – to be key to your professional equilibrium. More broadly, you've been behind the ambitious exhibition programme that has characterized Tate Modern since its inception. Among other things, this programme has involved splendid retrospectives of the work of great figures in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century French painting, like Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso. The contemporary French visual artist Pierre Huyghe was granted an exhibition in 2005, held in cooperation with the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris and selected for the "Paris Calling" season, organized by the French Embassy. In 2008 you also invited Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster to develop an installation

for the Turbine Hall. But above all you've helped broaden Tate Modern's research field beyond the Western world, playing a major role in introducing Latin American, Asian and African artists to Europe. You thus make an exemplary contribution to the cause of cultural diversity, to which my country is, as you know, especially committed.

*Cher* Sir Nicholas, in spite of this extraordinary career and success, I know you occasionally make blasé, even caustic remarks about your very purpose in life. In November 2000, when asked to deliver the Dibleby Lecture, you said: "I have no delusions. People may be attracted by the spectacle of new buildings, they may enjoy the social experience of visiting a museum, taking in the view, an espresso or glass of wine, purchasing a book or an artist designed T-shirt. Many are delighted to praise the museum, but remain deeply suspicious of the contents."

Allow me to tell you, Sir Nicholas, as a friend, that I believe you're at least partially wrong (and you doubtless know it). I think you've actually succeeded in changing the way many of the seven and a half million visitors who visit the four Tate galleries every year view modern and contemporary art. By furthering the cause of artists, you bring beauty, emotion and questions into your fellow citizens' lives. And perhaps, in so doing, you're responding, 45 years on, to the concerns Baroness Serota had when you decided to abandon economics for the history of art.

*Sir Nicholas Serota, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier dans l'Ordre de la Légion d'honneur.*

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*Cher* Chris Dercon,

It's a great pleasure for me to present you today with the insignia of *Officier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

Allow me to recall why you are a worthy candidate for this prestigious French ministerial order.

You were born in the Antwerp region in Belgium, in the heart of Flanders, which, since the Middle Ages, has been one of the centres of European painting and which is still today a major hub of contemporary creation in such disciplines as dance, theatre and contemporary art.

You were precocious in finding your vocation. At the age of 10 you visited your first museum: the Africa museum in Tervuren, where you remember slipping into the building's basement with your friends and imagining how you would fill its spaces. Perhaps it was a premonition, when one considers that you're preparing to inaugurate the "Oil tanks" in the basement of the museum you currently run, Tate Modern. So at a very young age you knew what path to take, and this naturally led you later to study history of art, theatre studies and film theory in the Netherlands.

You began your career at the Baronian-Lambert gallery in Ghent in 1981. Soon disillusioned with the "commercial" art world, you left the gallery in 1983 and continued your career as a

freelance documentary maker for Belgian television and radio. At the same time, you curated exhibitions.

In 1988, while continuing your activities as a freelance curator, you crossed the Atlantic to become programme director at PS1 in New York, then one of the world's most dynamic contemporary art centres. In 1990, you returned to the Netherlands to found and take over the helm of the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. You also worked regularly with the French author Raymond Bellour and art historian Jean-François Chevrier.

In 1996 you cooperated on the great exhibition "Face à l'histoire" – dedicated to the relations between artists, politics and history – at the Centre Georges Pompidou. That same year, you were appointed Director of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

In 2003, you settled in Munich to run the prestigious Haus der Kunst. Your first show, "Partners", was based on the collection of Ydessa Hendeles, curator and artist, and subsequently featured in a film by Agnès Varda. You organized the first retrospectives of the artists Amrita Sher-Gil – also later shown by the Tate Modern – and Ai Weiwei, who also exhibited in the Tate's Turbine Hall in 2010. Your curiosity and expertise encompass the most diverse subjects, from the Asian artistic scene to cinema, architecture, design and fashion. They drive you to discover and publicize new talent, among other things bringing to Munich the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes festival in 2010 for a film with funding from the Haus der Kunst.

Your tireless efforts extend to building and to museum history. In 2003 you decided to modify the architectural sections of the building used by the Nazis between 1937 and 1944 for their exhibitions of German art, thus restoring the building's original appearance.

Cher Chris Dercon, you really are a 21<sup>st</sup>-century museum director, and you're helping set an example in this area, while at the same time questioning it. For you, museums themselves have now become "mass media" which you like to see not as static, rigid monuments but, on the contrary, as buildings in constant movement, offering a flexibility hitherto unknown to the artists and works of today and tomorrow and where the public plays a key role.

So in March, the "BMW Tate live" series was launched on the Tate website, to which you attach great importance. In it, choreographers and artists presented, for the first time, a live show or performance conceived specifically to be broadcast on the Internet. For the programme's launch, you chose the French choreographer and artist Jérôme Bell.

In September another French choreographer, Boris Charmatz, will present "A History of Performance in 10 Acts", a work for the new "Oil Tanks" space, which I already mentioned in my tribute to Nicholas Serota. So you're very familiar with the French scene, where you enjoy a very good reputation yourself. The Centre Georges Pompidou has invited you to present a series of discussions this autumn on subjects close to your heart – photography, cinema, fashion, digital technology and education – as part of a series entitled "Selon Chris Dercon, têtes modernes (Modern heads as seen by Chris Dercon)", which will make its full contribution to the art of conversation.

So I'll end on that pun, cher Chris Dercon: you really are the "tête moderne" who, alongside Nicholas Serota, is mapping out the vision of what Tate Modern is to become. One condition is that it retains your own definition of modernity, which strikes me as very profound: "I regard myself as a modernist," you've said, "if being modern means having confidence in the future and at the same time believing in the past."

*Chris Dercon, au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres./.*