

ART & DESIGN

Tate's New Leader Has 'Fresh Eyes and a Lot of Energy.' Is That Enough?

By FARAH NAYERI JULY 6, 2017

LONDON — When Maria Balshaw was the director of the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, England, in 2008, she invited the performance artist Marina Abramovic and a couple of curators over for dinner. She cooked them a lamb-and-apricot tagine and served it at her kitchen table.

Then Ms. Abramovic made a brash proposal for a museum project. “Marina said, ‘I would like you to take all of the art out and give every space to a live artist,’” recalled Ms. Balshaw, who is now the director of Britain’s Tate network of art museums.

“I didn’t even know whether we could fit all of the paintings and drawings into the stores,” she said, using the Britishism for storage. “But I recognize a good idea when I see one, and I just looked up and said: ‘That sounds fantastic, Marina, yes!’”

The gamble paid off. For nearly three weeks, the emptied Whitworth hosted Ms. Abramovic and more than a dozen other performance artists in the well-attended “Marina Abramovic Presents.”

A bigger gamble now awaits as Ms. Balshaw takes over Tate. The job — which consists of running the London-based Tate Modern and Tate Britain, as well as Tate Liverpool and Tate St. Ives (in southwest England) — is huge. Ms. Balshaw succeeds Nicholas Serota, whose management of Tate transformed the institution, and also London and the British art scene.

Ms. Balshaw, 47, is Tate's first female director. She previously led an award-winning redevelopment of the Whitworth, and managed the Manchester Art Gallery and the city's cultural strategy as well. The Whitworth and Manchester art galleries drew about 900,000 visitors a year, compared with a combined 8.4 million at the Tate galleries in the year ended April 2017 (with St. Ives closed for refurbishment.)

Ms. Balshaw appears undaunted by the scale-up of steering a global flagship. But is she up to the big time? Even her supporters warn that she's undertaking a giant leap.

"Manchester is not London," said Bernard Blistène, the director of the Pompidou Center's Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, who recalled how he had come up through the regional museums of Marseille before transferring to the capital.

Settling in at her new office at Tate Britain, Ms. Balshaw said confidently, "I'm used to the balance of public funding, fund-raising, social purpose, education, as well as artistic risk-taking and adventure."

"All of that meant that when I looked at the job description, I fitted the bill," she added, sporting a gamin haircut and one of the lively outfits that she has become known for: a colorful tunic picturing objects from the Whitworth collections.

Tate today is vastly different from when Mr. Serota arrived in 1988, when it consisted of the late-19th-century building that is now Tate Britain, and the just-opened Tate Liverpool. Mr. Serota branched out further into the regions, and into a former power station that became Tate Modern; opened its 260 million pounds (\$337 million) extension, (now named after the billionaire donor Len Blavatnik) that drove total visitors to Tate Modern to a record 6.39 million; and helped popularize contemporary art with giant sculpture commissions inside Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and with the hotly debated Turner Prize competition.

"You can't replace Nick," said Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, one of the Tate's main partner institutions. "I think Tate did the right thing to look for somebody with a different set of skills that can build on what Nick has achieved, but obviously not to try and mimic that."

"Maria comes with fresh eyes and a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm, and a real commitment to working with the great staff that Nick had already put together, but perhaps to challenge it to think in new ways," Mr. Lowry added.

Ms. Balshaw inherits what is by and large an economically viable institution. Tate had an operating income of £84.2 million (\$109 million) in the fiscal year that ended in April 2016, roughly a third of it funded by the government. A £20 million (\$26 million) gap in the funding

of the new Tate Modern wing has been plugged with pledges, and an extra £6.5 million (\$8.3 million) a year in subsidies has been secured to operate it.

Attendance at the Tate sites in the year ending April 2016 was down 1.2 million partly because of a drop in Tate Britain visitors, whose numbers have declined in recent years, but may recover with the just-ended blockbuster David Hockney retrospective.

“I wouldn’t want to underestimate the scale of the financial challenge that the director of Tate is taking on,” said Stephen Deuchar, who ran Tate Britain from 1998 to 2009 and now heads the Art Fund, a national art charity whose 2015 Museum of the Year prize went to the Whitworth.

Tate Modern’s “huge expansion of real estate” will be costly, he said, requiring more visitor revenues and robust fund-raising in a “Brexit” world, with “top-level, multinational corporate sponsorship harder to secure” as Britain prepares to leave the European Union.

Ms. Balshaw preferred to emphasize the “social purpose” of being a national museum director. She said her priority was “to ensure that everybody, irrespective of background, feels that they can have a connection to Tate,” and that it is “as relevant to young people in Southwark” — where Tate Modern is — as it is “to visitors from Seoul.”

That would be achieved through outreach programs, she said, and through exhibitions that reflected the world in all its diversity. She praised Tate Britain’s current “Queer British Art” show, which features works from 1861 to 1967 by gay artists or representing gay and transgender subjects, and the “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” exhibition of works by black American artists from 1963 to 1983, which opens Wednesday, July 12, at Tate Modern.

Mr. Blistène recalled Ms. Balshaw’s program at the Whitworth — shows of female artists such as Mary Kelly and the “Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery” exhibition in 2007-08 — as often “political and critical,” yet noted that she managed to appeal to Manchester audiences.

But Tate is a much bigger beast, he said, with many more staff members, curators, buildings and programs. “You have to think of every kind of audience: the popular audience, the sophisticated audience,” he said. “You’re watched by your rivals, even if they’re friends. You’re watched by artists. It’s all extremely complicated.”

Born in Birmingham, Ms. Balshaw moved to Northampton as a child. Her mother was a teacher, and her father ran city parks. She came from a “very socially engaged family” of public

servants, teachers, social workers and pro bono lawyers, she said, and was “given books that helped define my future life, even though I was too young to realize that they would.”

One Christmas present at 12 was Alice Walker’s “The Color Purple.” She began to read Toni Morrison and feminist writings “challenging gender norms before anyone even knew how to say that phrase.”

After degrees in English, cultural studies and critical theory, she chose African-American visual and literary culture for her University of Sussex doctorate. (At Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where she often went for research, they called her “the English girl.”)

Her first culture job was as director of creative partnerships in Birmingham in 2002. Four years later, she was tapped to run the Whitworth — a university gallery with a 55,000-strong collection of textiles and prints as well as historic, modern and contemporary art. The museum, where David Hockney had staged a solo show, had “slightly lost its way,” Ms. Balshaw said.

The transformation she oversaw preserved the red-brick, neo-Gothic 1889 building and added airy modern spaces and a renovated park.

“She made a gallery that had been a bit stuck out on the edge of the city into something which was very exciting, ” said Richard Leese, the leader of the Manchester City Council.

The Whitworth reopened in 2015 with a show of the British artist Cornelia Parker, who described Ms. Balshaw as “fearless” in an interview. Ms. Parker remembered how the director let her ask a Nobel Prize-winning professor to extract graphene (an ultrathin layer of carbon) from a William Blake drawing and make a sensor that was used to ignite the opening-night fireworks.

While at the Whitworth, Ms. Balshaw also teamed up with the biennial Manchester International Festival, the multidisciplinary event that staged the Abramovic extravaganza, and its artistic director Alex Poots, who now heads the Shed in New York, an experimental-arts center to open in 2019. Mr. Poots said Ms. Balshaw was good at persuading politicians to part with money, wresting £78 million (\$101 million) in 2016 from their meeting with the chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne for Manchester’s future Factory arts complex.

Ms. Balshaw, who started on June 1, maintains an active social-media profile (her predecessor didn’t have one). In a June 24 Twitter post, the incoming director — who recently qualified as a yoga instructor — pictured her hand in a splint with the words: “Cracked wrist from big man falling on me in yoga class. #1stWorldProblem.”

Though her appointment represents a clear change of leadership style and tone, the challenges she faces are similar to those that another big man — Mr. Serota — confronted. Now the art world is watching to see if the Manchester model has prepared her for them.

Correction: July 10, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of a 1973 painting by Emma Amos. It is “Eva the Babysitter,” not “Eve.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 9, 2017, on Page AR16 of the New York edition with the headline: ‘Fresh Eyes and a Lot of Energy’.