

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

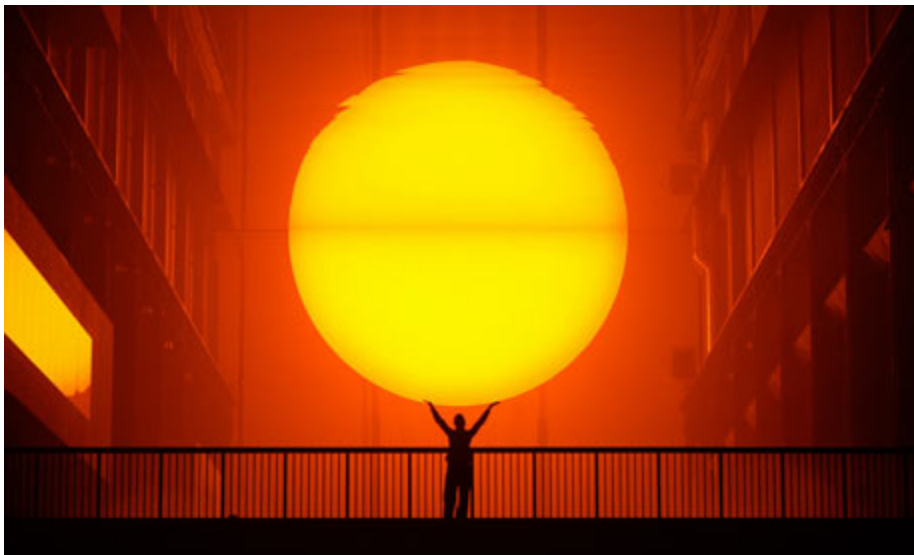
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### Review of the decade: Adrian Searle on visual art

Bigger was better in the noughties – and nothing summed up the art world's decade of bling more aptly than a skull encrusted with diamonds.

Adrian Searle

The Guardian, Monday 7 December 2009



The light at the end of the tunnel ... Olafur Eliasson's 2003 installation in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. Photograph: Dan Chung

The new century never got going till September 2001, with an audacious attack that seemed to change everything. Not long after 9/11 I was in New York, and found myself at an exhibition documenting the disaster. This ramshackle, ad-hoc show included photographs of wrecked lobbies clogged with rubble, a snowfall of dust covering restaurant tables set for lunch, the folded knitwear in a downtown boutique mired in filth.

There was amateur footage of the twin towers burning and collapsing, bodies falling through space; this was played and replayed, like a personal trauma running through your head.

It wasn't until 2005 that Gerhard Richter painted one of the only really telling responses to this dismal moment. Called simply September, the painting shows a generic image of the towers, sun-struck in the autumn morning and seething with smoke. There's that characteristic Richter blur: it feels like the mind won't focus. Overlaying the image are a few brusque swipes across the canvas, a gauzy smear of thin white paint, as if something had passed between us and the painting. Impatience, perhaps, or an acknowledgement that painting can't deal with more than appearances.

Tate Modern opened in London in 2000, and that too promised change, though few could predict that the building itself would become a major tourist attraction. Even much of the art, especially in the Turbine Hall, caters to an appetite for spectacle. People got all quasi-religious in front of Olafur Eliasson's 2003 wintry sun, using their bodies to write messages in the mirrored false ceiling. There was too much operatic artifice to Eliasson's work, and not quite enough to Carsten Holler's slides. It seemed that the public wanted excitement, danger, a physical rush that most art doesn't even try to provide. You can't account for the kinds of entertainment people make of the dourest art – whether Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth, her artificial crack that ran the length of the Turbine Hall, or Miroslaw Balka's How It Is, whose darkened space gives ample opportunity for witless use of mobile phone-cams. This year, on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth, Antony Gormley's One and Other turned the audience itself into the spectacle.

Even art's destruction, in the 2004 fire that engulfed a warehouse on the outskirts of London belonging to MoMart, the leading art handlers and storage company, created a frisson of pleasure in some quarters. Jake and Dinos Chapman's Hell, Tracey Emin's tent, as well as many other works owned by Charles Saatchi and – saddest of all – a

large chunk of the estate of the painter Patrick Heron, were consumed. The Chapmans rebuilt Hell – and made it much, much worse. The rest was irretrievable.

In October 2003, the first Frieze art fair brought international galleries and collectors to London's Regent's Park. It is hard to underestimate its effect: this was the first credible contemporary art fair in Britain, and chimed with the habits of the art-collecting rich, who prefer to do their shopping en masse at fairs. Over the decade, public and private galleries alike have timed their biggest shows to coincide with the annual fair. While money sloshed through the art world, prices went up, and quality often went down, to the point where a skull covered in diamonds became the most talked about and reproduced work of the decade. Damien Hirst's Beautiful Inside My Head Forever did nothing for me.

Art fairs, it has been said, are the new biennials. Some, like the Liverpool Biennial, which staggered through the decade, make one agree. But the big international circus goes on. The opening days of the Venice Biennale are now written-up as much in terms of parties and celebrities as the art. In 2007, the five-yearly Documenta in Kassel, Germany, and the once-a-decade Munster Sculpture Project followed Venice, and became part of an unseemly Grand Tour, which also took in the Basel art fair. Such migrations across Europe haven't been seen since the 30 years war.

### **The global art trail**

For critics, following this art trail is necessary, not least because of the huge changes brought about by the internet. One's readers are now as likely to be in Berlin or Toronto as the UK, and we often see the same artists, even the same works, in our respective cities. Artists now spend more time in airports than in their studios; it is increasingly impossible to categorise artists as either local or international, whatever that might mean. Events such as the Glasgow International and Manchester International are now must-sees, and the Folkestone Biennial looks like following suit. All have been leaps of faith, and prove that smaller sometimes really is better.

The opening of Baltic in Gateshead, Mima in Middlesbrough and the new Nottingham Contemporary have also bolstered regional fortunes; despite the Baltic's rocky history of directorial changes it has managed to give Tate Liverpool a run for its money.

Internationally, the 2006 Berlin Biennial, *Of Mice and Men*, curated by a team including artist Maurizio Cattelan, managed to acknowledge both the particular history of Berlin and bigger issues about what it means to make art now. This was my biennial of the decade.

In 2004, the Albanian artist Anri Sala made one of the best video shows I have ever seen, in the enormous medieval refectory of the Couvent des Cordeliers in Paris. The works were projected in half-light, on grey felt walls. An undernourished horse waited, at night, by a roadside on the outskirts of Tirana, while traffic roared past. Kids chased crabs across a beach, by torchlight. A DJ on a Tirana rooftop mixed disco beats in the torrential rain, against the backdrop of New Year fireworks exploding over the city. It was impossible not to think of other explosions, and other cities torn apart by war. The show was called *Entre Chien et Loup* (meaning that at dusk, one can't tell a wolf from a dog). A sort of dreary half-light also permeated two identical East End terrace houses in London's Whitechapel, where German artist Gregor Schneider installed *Die Familie Schneider*. In each house a woman potted in the kitchen, a man masturbated behind a shower curtain, a kid with a bin-liner over his head lay in an upstairs bedroom. The men and women were two pairs of twins, and all acted oblivious to visitors. There was something unpleasant down in that basement, but to this day I'm not sure what.

Only one woman, Tomma Abts, won the Turner prize in the noughties (though that may change when this year's winner is announced tonight). Abts' quiet, unsettling abstractions were described, derisively, by one German critic as the painted equivalent of geometric wallpaper from the old GDR. Sounded pretty good to me, but Abts's introspective, complex little paintings have a strange and mesmerising sense of absorption and contemplative reverie. Who said painting was dead, or could imagine work like this winning the Turner?

Tacita Dean has never won the prize, but went on to win major awards in the US and Germany, the latter just a couple of weeks ago. Dean's 16mm films are just one example of art that has gone to the movies in the last decade. Julian Schnabel has shown himself a far more accomplished film-maker than he is a painter, while artists Douglas Gordon and Phillippe Parreno had a surprise 2005 cinema hit with Zidane, their film about the French footballer. Steve McQueen won the Cannes Golden Camera award in 2008 with Hunger, a moving film about Irish hunger-striker Bobby Sands. Neither film sacrificed the impulses or aesthetics of its director.

### **Space exploration**

The shows that have stayed with me include 2007's Courbet exhibition in Paris and New York, and both Manet and Picasso at the Prado in Madrid; all were exemplary. So, too, was El Greco at the National Gallery, and the current The Sacred Made Real, featuring 17th-century Spanish painting and sculpture. But the work that affected me most was Richard Serra's Promenade at the Grand Palais in Paris last year. Off-vertical steel plates marched through the belle-epoque building, pacing you as much as measuring the space. Promenade slowed you down, stopped you, made you aware of yourself and the place you were in. It wasn't entertainment.