

## CHRIS DERCON INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

### **Rosie Goldsmith:**

London today can boast some of the world's greatest art museums, from the British Museum to the Victoria and Albert to the Tate. There's Tate Britain, at one end of the Thames, and Tate Modern – housing the international collections - at the other end, in the converted Bankside Power Station. It's hard to believe that Tate Modern was only opened in the year 2000 and that it's now the most popular modern art gallery in the world, with nearly 5 million visitors a year.

Belgian-born Chris Dercon became Director of Tate Modern in 2011 – the same year a German, Martin Roth, became director of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Chris Dercon had already held top jobs in Rotterdam, New York and - for nearly a decade - in Munich. He turned Munich's Haus Der Kunst - the controversial museum built by Adolf Hitler - into a major exhibition space, attracting some of the world's top living artists, performers, musicians, and architects.

Chris Dercon is a leading international arts figure, both populist and intellectual, innovative and – as someone called him “high wattage” - which is exactly why we need him here in London....

Chris Dercon, how would you describe your role here at Tate Modern?

### **Chris Dercon:**

I always describe it as being an editor-in-chief. I think that leaders of today, especially cultural leaders today, have to learn. The world of culture is getting so vast and so complex and it's changing day by day. I'm an editor-in-chief and I like to be a producer. I'm also a goalie, because there are so many things coming towards us from generous financial refugees coming from all over the world to live in London and expecting things from London which, ultimately, we cannot give them all the time. So I'm a goalie, I'm a producer, I'm an editor-in-chief. And also I like to speculate about the future and I like to throw out issues – small, big, extra large. And I want to see what the reaction is of those people who know things better than me.

### **Rosie Goldsmith:**

When you joined Tate Modern, what did you want to achieve? What were your main goals?

### **Chris Dercon:**

A new model of the museum of the future, which, I think, was already on its way. That's why I decided to join. And the museum of the future is going to be completely different from a place where people come to admire or come to get things, get to things, which they already know. The museum of the future is going to be like a university, like a campus, where the art is one thing, but the fact that you have so many different encounters and that you can test your own ideas out, that you can throw your own questions out about gender, identity, about the world, about salaries. And a museum is ultimately a much more representative, democratic society, it's a real form of demos, even more democratic than the way we are represented by politicians. I mean, do we still feel represented by politicians? By bankers? By insurers? By property owners? Probably not. We have to learn to represent ourselves. Self-governance. We have to learn how to make decisions for ourselves. And a museum can teach that, can offer possibilities. I call them probabilities. And that's what a museum is going to be in the future about.

### **Rosie Goldsmith:**

Tate Modern is expanding, extending and you are overseeing a doubling of the display space. Why is this happening? Why do you have to do this?

### **Chris Dercon:**

Now, the new building of Tate Modern is not just the expansion of the museum, but it is an expansion of an idea. And the expansion of the idea doesn't mean by necessity more space, but to create a different space,

to create different layers of space, to make space, which can be used in many different ways. And that's going to be the new building of Tate. The first building of Tate Modern looked like a power station. And it gave London a modern face, a contemporary face. The new building of Tate Modern will give London a contemporary place. And a contemporary place means a public space in a city, which is highly privatised, in a city, which is too expensive for most of the people to continue to live here and to continue to use it. And this space should be a space for freedom, for different forms of usage. So the new space we are building is very much telling the story of the collections in many different ways and offering them for free to many, many different people, but also to create lots of social space, learning place, meeting place, encounters. Because, you know what? We cannot keep encountering people by all these machines. We have to meet people in a real way. And that's the reason why we talk today about Taksim Square. That's the reason why we talk about the streets of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Fortaleza. That's the reason why we are really now having to see that we are trying to reinvent the whole notion of representation. The notion of representation is going via tweets, but also via being there. The standing man on Taksim Square is "I am, I am here and you better take notice of it."

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Tate Modern is a museum of modern art, a museum of international art. Have we in Britain got better at appreciating international art?

**Chris Dercon:**

Oh, yes, we do, because...

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

When you say "we", do you mean "we, British" or "we, Europeans"?

**Chris Dercon:**

We Europeans. When I say "we" it's "we Europeans". But also it's "we", because I'm part of a team. And we are starting to see things differently in London. Everybody is doing it. When you go to the V&A things are taken very seriously, coming from everywhere. That's the nature of the V&A, but it's not just the V&A, it's not just the British Museum, it's also Tate Modern and it's also all these cutting edge places from South London Gallery to the Showroom in Maida Vale, to Chisenhale, to the Serpentine Gallery. And they are doing a magnificent job showing artists from Egypt, from Brazil, showing artists from Iran, to show a way or ways of dealing with these different things, but now even Tate Modern is doing it, right?

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Chris, you're a great champion of international art. Can you achieve that goal here in the Britain?

**Chris Dercon:**

It's quite interesting, it's an amazing paradox that, because of the fact that London is becoming the financial hub, more and more so in the world, and because of the influx of so much foreign capital - I call them always financial refugees - some of these people are really good and they do believe in culture. They bring also not just the form of restraint - like the rents are going up and up - but they also bring contacts and possibilities. I see the presence of many of these people also as a guarantee that these things can be looked after, because they are coming from Latin America, they are coming from the Middle East, they are coming from the Far East, they are coming from Eastern Europe, but they are also coming from these Catholic countries, Greek Orthodox like Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, so it's becoming quite interesting. It's an amazing paradox. These things, they will hinder us to do certain things, to live a certain way we did, but they also make it possible to change the city from within. We have to be very, very careful, we have to manage all those contradictions and these paradoxes. And there should be no taboos. The problem in Great Britain in politics and the way of living is so many non-tacit or non-dixit things, which are not spoken about. I'm coming from a culture, which is probably Dutch, which is probably German, Middle European, where we live off the dialectism, off this kind of conflict. Maybe that's my role here, to speak about it?

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

What do you think you have brought from the rest of Europe to Britain?

**Chris Dercon:**

Languages...which is very important. I think one of the most shocking things is that I work with great young people who only speak one language, who didn't travel the world because of financial constraints, because of logistical or whatever constraints. I see that this country is becoming quite isolated, but it's an isolation, which is thrown upon themselves, it is a self-inflicted isolation. And I think it is not at all very constructive to look just at London and then over the ocean to look at United States. I think Great Britain without Europe would be an entirely different country. But before that some more work needs to be done. Because my biggest problem is in working here in London is that London is not just forgetting Europe, but also forgetting Great Britain. And that's, I think, a great shame. I'm coming from a country, working in a country where you speak about not nationality, not an identity, but you still speak about regions. And a country like Germany, where cities are more or less equal, they have equal possibilities. But when you speak here about Sheffield, when you speak here about Nottingham, when you speak about even Scotland, people don't take it seriously. And that's becoming quite a problem.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Today, museum directors also have to be fundraisers. What's your secret as a fundraiser?

**Chris Dercon:**

I'm not good at it, we are good at it. Because you cannot fundraise by yourself. Nick Serota is very good at it. Our Development Department is very good at it. And it's because we are offering a product, which is probably quite unique and people feel they want to join in. Because I think when you have a good product and you are part of an amazing brand then people want to join in. You have to understand what they want to make sure that they understand what you want.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Have we in Britain finally accepted that banks and businesses and so on have to fund the arts, as well as the state?

**Chris Dercon:**

First of all the state has the obligation to fund the arts, because to fund the arts means to create a platform for innovation. Innovation is a platform for economical growth. And that's the reason why I think banks and other businesses are becoming interested in it, because we represent a different form of innovation, which is a guarantee for a different form of growth. Because, we talk about growth...in the future it's not going to be just accumulation of things, it has to be something different. First of all we also talk about distribution of goods. And I think banks and other businesses start to understand that we cannot keep all these goods and all these goodies in the hands of fewer and fewer people. That's becoming ultimately very dangerous for our democratic model, because people will not just go on the streets in Turkey and in Rio de Janeiro, but in other European streets as well. What are we going to do about youth unemployment? It's a question of distribution of goods. And it's a question of making innovation possible. That's one example.

So, ultimately it's also a question of self-interest to start, to become aware of these institutions and organisation models, who don't need your help, no, they might help you when you give.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

When you came from Germany, you came from a country where the arts are reasonably well funded. Do you regret leaving Germany?

**Chris Dercon:**

I miss lots of things about Germany. I miss here the fact that Germany still has a middle class which is taken seriously and which continues to grow and which continues to have the means to improve their lives and their conditions of living. When I look at youngsters here in the city I always warn them and I say "don't be too enthusiastic, because enthusiasm might lead to self-exploitation." And I'm very, very wary about how the one percent is giving more and more means to concentrate their power, and not just economical power, but also social and political power. It's going to be rough, it's going to be very rough. You have to keep your eyes open. I'm not gloom and doom, but if things don't change, things might not get pretty.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

How long do you want to stay here, at Tate Modern? What do you want to achieve?

**Chris Dercon:**

As long as they need me.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

So in ten years time, what do you hope to have achieved by then?

**Chris Dercon:**

I think we are going to test out, we are going to be able to have tested out the new building. And if that whole prediction of the future, which we see as the museum as a social space, as a university, as a campus - if it really became true. That's number one. Number two, is we have to reinvent economical models. Private/public, is that going to be a way out? Or do we have to say to the government "we need more subsidy because of innovation and because of problems, social problems."

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Is private/public the answer?

**Chris Dercon:**

It's not just the answer. I think the whole idea of putting everything on philanthropy is not the answer. We have to think of completely new organisation models. That's the reason why I'm very, very happy to be part of the European Cultural Foundation where we are not looking for art and artists to give them a big prize in honour of Princess Margriet, but where we are now looking into new models of organising culture

[RG: And giving them prizes for that?]

Yes...self-organisation. We are looking into what theatres in Italy are doing, beyond private/public, what very, very important cities in terms of youth, like Zagreb in Croatia are doing. We are very much looking into the situation in Spain.

**Rosie Goldsmith:**

Much more European networking in the arts world...

**Chris Dercon:**

Yes. And that's something which I would like to help to oversee, that in Great Britain one not just looks into London, but also beyond London, in the regions here, but also in the European regions, because Great Britain has to learn a lot from these other cities in the North and in the West. It can also learn from other cities in Europe.