

Tate Modern's Turbine Hall: Generation(s) of Power

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Tony Bennett's *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988) offers a lens through which to consider Tate Modern's shift from a private power station to a publicly accessible museum. In the Turbine Hall, our ability to see and be seen through multiple vantage points makes a shift from private to public space visible. Through narrative description of the Turbine Hall's architecture, I lead us in a search for vantage points from which to view it, and each other, from many heights and angles. On this journey, I ask whether our movement between vantage points may loosen strict delineations of object or subject, spectacle or surveillance, seen or seeing, to specific locations. This is highlighted by autoethnographic accounts of *Behind the Red Moon* (2023) and *Open Wound* (2024), revealing my journeys through the Turbine Hall as few of the many possible.

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Tate Modern's Turbine Hall: Generation(s) of Power

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Since the opening of Tate Modern in 2000, the Turbine Hall has been home to artworks that contend with its architecture, most notably those that are part of the Unilever Series and Hyundai Commission. Selecting a different artist annually, each have attempted to battle the Turbine Hall's enormous scale for visitors' attention.¹ Some of these artworks have given us permission to behave differently in the Turbine Hall compared to Tate Modern's adjacent buildings.² For example, sliding down the slides of Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006) or swinging on the swings of SUPERFLEX's *One Two Three Swing!* (2017). There are also opportunities to question where we are. For example, the fountain of Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* (2019), or the human interactions of Tino Sehgal's *These Associations* (2012). Others have emphasised the many opportunities to see and be seen in and around the Turbine Hall. For example, the towers of Louise Bourgeois' *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* (2000) created new vantage points from which to view the Turbine Hall and other visitors, while Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) created a mirrored ceiling for visitors to stare back at themselves.³

Tate Modern is housed within the 'shell' of Bankside Power Station.⁴ Designed by Giles Gilbert Scott and opened in 1963, by 1981 it was no longer economically viable to keep open.⁵ The result of Tate Modern's opening in 2000 is a shift in function, where a power station intended 'to keep the public out now welcomes people in'.⁶ The Tate Modern we see today is realised by its extension into Bankside Power Station's 'Switch House' and disused oil tanks below.⁷ On the completion of this extension in 2016, the

¹ Jin Baek and Yoon-Jeong Shin, 'Accidental yet Transformative: Site-Specificity of the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 19.1 (2015), pp. 49–60 (p. 50, p. 55), doi:[10.1017/s1359135515000287](https://doi.org/10.1017/s1359135515000287).

² Helen Rees Leahy, 'Watch Your Step: Embodiment and Encounter at Tate Modern', in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. by Sandra H. Dudley (Routledge, 2013), pp. 162–174 (p. 168), doi:[10.4324/9780203523018](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203523018).

³ Diarmuid Costello, 'The Work of Art and Its 'Public': Heidegger and Tate Modern', in *Beyond the Museum: Art, Institutions, People*, ed. by Ian Cole and Nick Stanley, Museum of Modern Art Papers, 4 (Museum of Modern Art, 2000), pp. 12–26 (p. 17); Leahy, 'Watch Your Step', p. 168.

⁴ Costello, 'The Work of Art and Its 'Public'', p. 16.

⁵ Adrian Hardwicke, 'Chronology', in *Building Tate Modern: Herzog & De Meuron Transforming Giles Gilbert Scott*, ed. by Rowan Moore and Raymund Ryan (Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), pp. 191–193 (p. 191).

⁶ Rowan Moore, 'Architecture in Motion', in *Tate Modern: The First Five Years* (Tate Publishing, 2005), pp. 29–32 (p. 30).

⁷ Wouter Davidts, 'A Ziggurat of Brick and Concrete', in *Tate Modern: Building a Museum for the 21st Century*, ed. by Chris Dercon and Nicholas Serota (Tate Publishing, 2016), pp. 47–63 (p. 56).

Turbine Hall provides a physical link between the Blavatnik Building (opened as the Switch House) to the south, and the Natalie Bell Building (opened in 2000 as the Boiler House) to the north.⁸ This connection is facilitated through openings on level zero, a 'bridge platform' on level one, and a second bridge on level four, unveiled as part of the 2016 extension.⁹

In this article, I will consider the shift from private power station to public museum in the context of Tony Bennett's *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988). Bennett illustrates how exhibitionary institutions of the nineteenth century opened their doors and made 'order visible' through positions that allowed the public to see and be seen.¹⁰ These positions are exemplified in the construction of vantage points.¹¹ Through narrative description of the Turbine Hall's architecture, I will lead us in a search of its own vantage points. I highlight this journey with accounts of my experiences being seen from these positions when artworks are present in the Turbine Hall. This approach is intended to explore how the push and pull of seeing and being seen can be agitated by our movement through the space.

I have chosen to highlight my experiences of El Anatsui's *Behind the Red Moon* (2023) and Mire Lee's *Open Wound* (2024). These accounts are not intended to comprehensively address these artworks, nor the careers and intentions of their artists and curators. Rather, their purpose is to explore the ways in which they interact with our ability to see and be seen in the Turbine Hall. This choice is rooted in their contrasting approaches to the space and the temporal proximity of my experience of them. Where *Behind the Red Moon* isolates and interferes with some lines of vision, *Open Wound* emphasises that the Turbine Hall's open doors invite us in to look.

Public and private displays of power

Tony Bennett's *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988) offers a lens through which to consider Tate Modern's shift from a private power station to a publicly accessible museum.

⁸ 'Floor Plans', in *Tate Modern: Building a Museum for the 21st Century*, ed. by Chris Dercon and Nicholas Serota, pp. 192–219.

⁹ Raymund Ryan, 'Transformation', in *Building Tate Modern*, ed. by Rowan Moore and Raymund Ryan, pp. 13–36 (p. 30).

¹⁰ Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. by Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne (Taylor & Francis, 2005), pp. 58–80 (p. 60), doi:[10.4324/9780203991534](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991534) (first publ. in *New Formations*, 4 (1988), pp. 73–102).

¹¹ Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 62.

Bennett argues that exhibitionary institutions developed in the nineteenth century, such as museums, 'national and [...] international exhibitions, arcades and department stores' produced a 'complex of disciplinary and power relations'.¹² The development of exhibitionary institutions is placed in juxtaposition to the shift from public punishment to private discipline in the development of the carceral archipelago, as observed by Michel Foucault.¹³ In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault explores the techniques of disciplinary power, such as surveillance, using Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison designs. In the Panopticon, the incarcerated person is the object of sight, seen but unable to return the gaze.¹⁴ Cells that concentrically face a central tower create 'an axial visibility'.¹⁵ Yet the walls between these cells separate and isolate, enforcing a 'lateral invisibility' that acts as a 'guarantee of order'.¹⁶

If carceral and exhibitionary forms were 'response[s] to the problem of order', the latter 'transform[ed] that problem into one of culture'.¹⁷ Its institutions intended to fashion a proximity to power, opening their doors and inviting the public to see 'themselves from the side of power' as 'both the subjects and objects of knowledge'.¹⁸ Bennett offers The Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition of 1851, as an example of how architecture was used to make its exhibits visually accessible and simultaneously provide 'vantage points from which everyone could be seen'.¹⁹ Yet, not all vantage points are created equal, or show the same view. Like 'exhibition halls of expositions', museums utilised 'galleries affording a superior vantage point from which the layout of the whole and the activities of other visitors could also be observed'.²⁰ By moving to and from such vantage points, 'the subject and object positions can be exchanged'.²¹ Bennett is careful to clarify that the architecture of such institutions does not 'simply [reverse] the principles of panopticism'.²² Instead, the exchange between seeing and being seen has

¹² Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 58.

¹³ Ibid.; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (Vintage Books, 1995).

¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 59.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

²¹ Ibid., p. 65.

²² Ibid., p. 64.

the effect of 'combining the functions of spectacle and surveillance.'²³ In consequence, order is maintained through 'self-observation from a certain perspective.'²⁴

Our search for the Turbine Hall's vantage points

Facing the Turbine Hall's entrance, the windows of Bankside Power Station's brick façade afford us only a glimpse of what is beyond. As we approach, a ramp extends from the building's interior, beckoning us closer. Moving forward, glass doors are slowly revealed to puncture the bottom sliver of the façade's height (Fig. 1). Once its full height is revealed, we anticipate that the brick hides something.

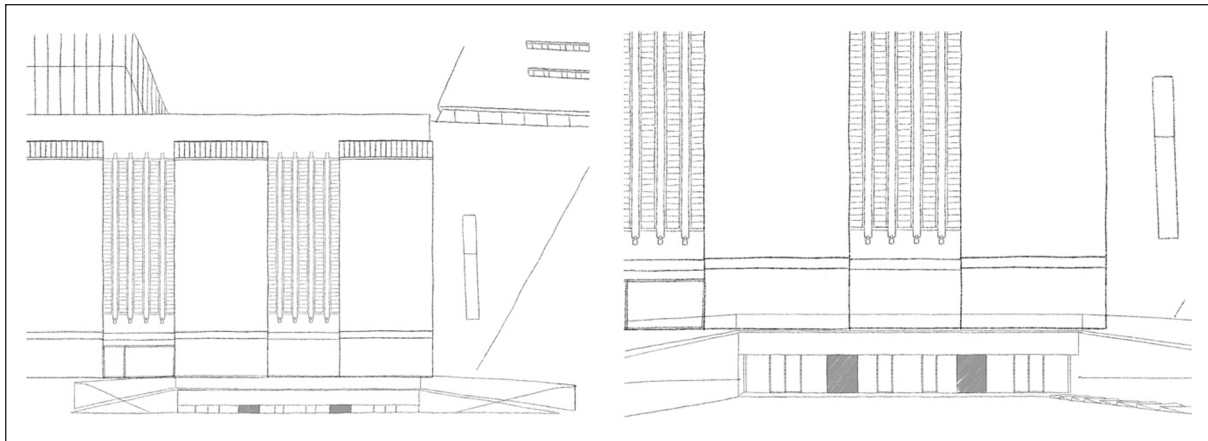


FIG. 1. Approaching the Turbine Hall's entrance. Image by the author, 2026.

As we cross the threshold through glass doors, the space shifts. Our view of the Turbine Hall quickly expands as we move, revealing its dimensions at thirty-five metres tall, twenty-three metres wide and 155 metres long (Fig. 2).²⁵ Guided by the ramp, the shift feels sudden: as we move inside, the height of the hall creates the illusion that we squeezed through a door frame of even smaller proportions. The shift is also interrupted. A 'sensation of compression' and subsequent 'release' give us only seconds to decide where to look, before our attention is drawn to our right or left, and we are asked to have our bags checked.²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 62, p. 65.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁵ Adrian Hardwicke, 'Information', in *Building Tate Modern*, ed. by Rowan Moore and Raymund Ryan, p. 194.

²⁶ Nick Stanley, 'Moving People, Moving Experiences: Novel Strategies in Museum Practice', in *Beyond the Museum*, ed. by Ian Cole and Nick Stanley, pp. 42–48 (p. 43).

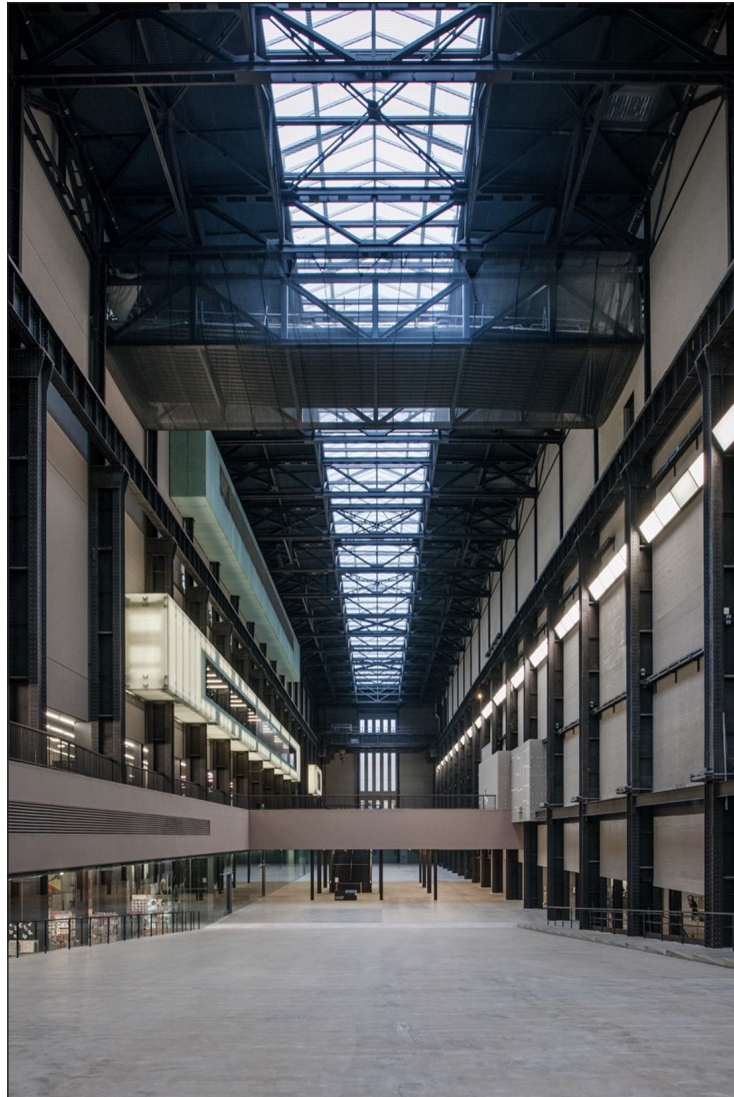


FIG. 2. *Architectural Photography of the Turbine Hall*, Tate Modern. 2013. © Tate Photography.

The ramp continues, guiding us forward. In front and above us are two bridges connecting levels one and four of the buildings adjacent to the Turbine Hall. The first, directly in front of us, is easy to spot. We crane our necks back to see the second, which almost blends into the roof's rafters. To our left, windows protrude from and stretch across the Natalie Bell Building on levels two, three, and four.²⁷ Looking up at visitors above, 'an answering play of glances' ensures that our ability to see and be seen is one of the first things announced to us after entering the hall.²⁸

The ramp below us slopes to eventually even out and present us with the first of many choices: turn left, to the Natalie Bell Building, right, to the Blavatnik Building, or up, to the level one bridge. Turning left, we leave the hall through a glass door,

²⁷ Windows on level three are flush with the interior façade.

²⁸ Leahy, 'Watch Your Step', p. 165. See also, Costello, 'The Work of Art and Its 'Public'', p. 17.

contained within a glass wall. Moving into the Natalie Bell Building, the glass allows us to anticipate the shift down in scale before it happens, in contrast to our experience of the entrance. Ejected onto each floor's concourse from the escalator, lifts, or staircase, the long strips of windows we observed from within the Turbine Hall are revealed. Access to other windows, located at the west or east end of the Turbine Hall, are hidden within galleries on levels two and four. These windows give us the opportunity to look 'down and across from the vantage points created', lined with chairs and sofas that invite us to stay awhile.²⁹ In effect, each level of the Natalie Bell Building invites us to climb the Turbine Hall higher and higher, offering new vantages and views as we move through and around it.

To reach the Blavatnik Building, we physically re-enter the Turbine Hall via bridges on levels one and four. Atop both bridges, we are offered views of the entrance and back of the Turbine Hall. The back wall features windows that seem to echo those of the façade. However, the top half of these windows reveal nothing behind, and the lower portion suggest a space we cannot reach. In the direct line of vision of the visitors entrance is, in fact, a mirror of an entrance inaccessible to us: the staff entrance.

At the end of our search, our bodies feel tired. We seek seats and visual refuge behind the Turbine Hall's mostly opaque side, the Blavatnik Building. We might consider the higher positions we reached as similar to the 'superior vantage point' Bennett discusses, from which the expanse of the Turbine Hall and the 'activities of other visitors' are visible to us.³⁰ Looking down from a higher vantage, sometimes the view these positions offer feel like an open expanse of different paths to willingly take.³¹ From below, the 'compression' of the entrance may feel like 'manipulation', overwhelming the senses, pushing our bodies forward and eyes upward.³² On our way up, the number of other visitors we pass may affect how long we want to stay and look.³³ As those we see become smaller, we recall being in their position, or anticipate returning to the Turbine Hall to join them.

²⁹ Leahy, p. 165.

³⁰ Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 64.

³¹ This feeling can also be possible 'immediately on entrance', see Jen Harvie, 'Agency and Complicity in 'A Special Civic Room': London's Tate Modern's Turbine Hall', in *Performance and the City*, ed. by D. J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr, and Kim Solga, Performance Interventions (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 204–221 (p. 207), doi:[10.1007/978-0-230-30521-2_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-30521-2_12).

³² Stanley, 'Moving People, Moving Experiences', p. 43; Leahy, 'Watch Your Step', p. 165.

³³ Sandra Kreidel, 'Concept and Experience: Tate Modern: An Essay on the Intersection of Orders in Architecture' (unpublished MA thesis, University College London, 2008), p. 24 <<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1568029>> [accessed 20 June 2026].

Behind the Red Moon

In El Anatsui's *Behind the Red Moon* (2023), three shimmering 'hangings' disrupt lines of vision along the Turbine Hall's east-west axis (Fig. 3).³⁴ These 'hangings' are structured in successive *Acts*, descending from the roof but staged differently, 'play[ing] with our movement through' the hall.³⁵ *Act I: The Red Moon* is positioned soon after the entrance, angled towards it. Behind *The Red Moon*, *Act II: The World* hangs above the ramp, before the level one bridge. While its predecessors must be passed under, *Act III: The Wall* must be moved around, extending from the roof to the floor near the back of the Turbine Hall. By blocking certain vantage points, these *Acts* effectively demarcate the Turbine Hall into three areas and sometimes disrupt the ability of other visitors to see me, or vice versa. However, their materiality, constructed of intricately joined liquor bottle tops and their parts, means they are not completely opaque.³⁶ As I stand beneath, move around, or hide behind them, their opacity fluctuates.³⁷



FIG. 3. *Installation photography of The Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind The Red Moon*, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, 10 October 2023–14 April 2024, El Anatsui born 1944. Tate, Hyundai Commission. © El Anatsui. Photo © Tate (Joe Humphrys).

³⁴ Osei Bonsu, 'Material and Metaphor: El Anatsui's Sculptural Sublime', in *El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon*, ed. by Osei Bonsu (Tate Publishing, 2024), pp. 28–39 (p. 39).

³⁵ Bonsu, 'Material and Metaphor', p. 39. Though my focus is where the movement of my body and vision meets these *Acts*, they point to multiple forms and interpretations of movement. Curator Osei Bonsu states that the installation 'is concerned with the collision of histories and cultures that grew out of the colonial encounter between Africa and Europe [...] [and] gestures towards entangled histories of trade, migration and exchange upon which the colonial encounter was built.'; 'Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon', Tate, n.d. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/el-anatsui/exhibition-guide>> [accessed 19 August 2026].

³⁶ Bonsu, pp. 37–39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Act I: The Red Moon is visible before entering the Turbine Hall, its reds viewed through the façade's windows. On crossing the threshold, a sudden spatial shift is transformed into a pocket of smaller proportions, *The Red Moon's* edges pulled almost to the height of the Turbine Hall's roof and walls. *The Red Moon* pauses my descent of the ramp and cushions the 'sensation of compression' I experience when entering the hall.³⁸ Positioned as if a gust of wind has pushed it taut towards the entrance, I almost expect a real gale force to throw me back through its doors. In the pocket of space created, I look up and left to see other visitors in the Natalie Bell Building. I can try to hide from these windows by moving under and behind *The Red Moon*.

Moving forward, I discover what *The Red Moon* conceals: the centre of the Turbine Hall and *Acts II* and *III*. Reaching the end of the ramp, *Act II: The World*, floats above me. Ascending the level one bridge, I turn back towards the hall's entrance to face *The World*, *The Red Moon* now revealed in golden tones. *The World's* parts all differ in shape, some curve or fluctuate, encroaching on the space of others. Their arrangement encourages me to move my body to gain a different vantage; to view them as parts or a whole. In this central space, my gaze can return those of visitors on the Natalie Bell Building's concourses and level four bridge. However, I am unable to see clearly past *The Red Moon* to my left, and *The Wall* to my right.

Descending the level one bridge onto the Turbine Hall's floor, I reach *Act III: The Wall*. Positioned at the back of the hall, areas of black are joined by multiple colours as it descends, meeting the floor in a crash that ebbs and flows from my feet. Peering around the right side of *The Wall*, I enter a space somewhat obscured from the rest of the Turbine Hall, behind bands of silver, yellow, and red. I am seen clearly by two vantage points: a window peeking out of a gallery on level two of the Natalie Bell Building, and the windows at the back of the hall. Here, these vantage points confront each other, the former accessible to me, while the latter denies my entry with its own wall. Looking up and between, I too confront them. Though the air renders them still, the *Acts* of *Behind the Red Moon* guide me in and out of focus. A 'technology of vision' in the Turbine Hall is revealed as unstable, pervious to an artwork that interrupts its lines of sight.³⁹

Open Wound

Mire Lee's *Open Wound* (2024) focuses lines of vision onto processes of production, asking me to share space with reminders of the Turbine Hall's previously closed doors.

³⁸ Stanley, 'Moving People, Moving Experiences', p. 43.

³⁹ Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 64.

This artwork partially fills the Turbine Hall with ‘pieces of fabric’ or ‘skins’ hung from chains attached to the hall’s roof at varying heights (Fig. 4).⁴⁰ At the back of the hall lives a ‘motorised structure’ which evokes a moving turbine.⁴¹ During opening hours, the turbine rotates, slowly saturating the ‘skins’ with a ‘viscous liquid’.⁴² The turbine is held in the air by one of the remnants of Bankside Power Station: a ceiling crane.⁴³ Once saturated, the ‘skins’ are moved by ‘technicians’ to dry before being hung from the Turbine Hall’s ceiling.⁴⁴ While my ability to see and be seen remains intact, the re-introduction of a working turbine reminds me that the Turbine Hall’s doors used to be perpetually closed to the public, its own turbines hidden.



FIG. 4. *Installation photography of the Hyundai Commission: Mire Lee: Open Wound, Third Skin, February 2025, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, 9 October 2024–16 March 2025, Mire Lee born 1988. Tate, Hyundai Commission. © Mire Lee. Photo: © Tate (Sam Day).*

⁴⁰ Alvin Li, ‘Hell Is Better with Other People’, in *Mire Lee: Open Wound*, ed. by Alvin Li and Bilal Akkouche (Tate Publishing, 2025), pp. 56–69 (p. 57).

⁴¹ Li, ‘Hell Is Better with Other People’, p. 57.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

I must visit the Turbine Hall more than once to catch a glimpse of *Open Wound's* turbine in motion. On my first visit, just after crossing the threshold, my eyes are drawn upwards by numerous 'skins' hanging from the roof, beginning just before the level one bridge.⁴⁵ Looking up, they occupy the upper section of the hall, but do not crowd it enough to obscure my view of the Natalie Bell Building's windows and visitors. The fabric of the 'skins' is not opaque, rather, they seem to be deteriorating, on the verge of falling apart.⁴⁶ Stopping before the level one bridge's staircase, I notice the back of the hall is closed, as a barrier prevents me moving forward. Ascending the bridge, I look down to find what looks like a turbine: turned off, under operation by 'technicians' in high-vis jackets and hard hats.⁴⁷ Confused, I decide to return another day, hopefully when things are working again.

Upon my return, I am surprised to see the turbine working and accessible at the back of the hall, now lifted and methodically turning above a metal tray. As the turbine rotates, it drips a sludge-like liquid above multiple 'skins' and meets the divot of the tray in a loud splash that I fear might stain my clothes if I get too close.⁴⁸ In neither of my described visits do I ever see the 'skins' move, yet I assume they do from their placement in the Turbine Hall.⁴⁹ I watch as one is saturated by the turbine, see more drying in its periphery, conclude that a lack of dripping liquid on my head means those above me have long since dried. I assume there is a production that I only witness a part of.

Open to all the vantage points we searched for, my ability to see and be seen by other visitors remains intact. However *Open Wound* might distract our gaze. Standing beside its turbine, I can look upwards to most of the Natalie Bell Building's windows, or behind me to the bridges on levels one and four. From most of these positions, so too can other visitors stare back at me. The moving turbine, its saturated products and surrounding tools, join our 'mutual watching'.⁵⁰ To a certain degree, these parts emphasise this reciprocal gaze, as I wonder what the scene before me might look like from a higher vantage. However, I recall that their presence is what prevented me from standing in this same position during my last visit. Looking side to side, part of me expects a 'technician' to re-emerge at any second, gently usher me away, and declare they had made a mistake

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Curator Alvin Li states that the number of 'skins' accumulated in the hall over the six-month period, 'as if it were the interior of a body [...] shedding its lining inwardly.' More 'skins' were present after my visits in November and December 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Harvie, 'Agency and Complicity in 'A Special Civic Room'', p. 208.

by leaving the doors open.⁵¹ From above, other visitors watch me share the space with *Open Wound*, as I see and feel the absence of Bankside Power Station's turbines removed to make way for us to look.

Conclusion

One of my intentions in considering the Turbine Hall in the context of Tony Bennett's *The Exhibitionary Complex* is to invite the limitations its application might expose. My focus on vision can have the consequence of considering it as a form of certainty.⁵² The certainty that to see from certain positions is to be closer to 'the side of power', to surveil from its vantage.⁵³ In turn, to be seen from these positions is to form a spectacle, controlled and watched through a frame that distances us from each other.⁵⁴ A 'self-monitoring system of looks' may be structurally organised by exhibitionary architecture, but in Tate Modern, the exchange between object that is seen and subject that sees is hard to confine to one ramp, window, or bridge.⁵⁵ Some vantage points are easier to find than others, or show wider expanses. Others are interrupted or distracted by artworks, requiring us to move to a different angle or vantage to see each other clearly. The exchange moves with us, in constant flux.⁵⁶ In a space of this magnitude, our journeys diverge, blend, twist and merge, perhaps until some lines of sight blur completely.

Acknowledgements

I first explored some of the ideas in this article in my unpublished MA dissertation (2023). I would like to thank Dr. Simon O'Meara for feedback on an early draft of this article.

⁵¹ Li, 'Hell Is Better with Other People', p. 57.

⁵² See also Mark Wigley's assertion that 'we publicly describe architecture as a source of certainty.' Mark Wigley, 'The Deconstructive Project Is a Project of Optimism. Mark Wigley Interviewed by Francisco Díaz', *ARQ (Santiago)*, 112 (2022), pp. 4–21 (p. 9), doi:[10.4067/S0717-69962022000300004](https://doi.org/10.4067/S0717-69962022000300004).

⁵³ Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', p. 60.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

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