

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #1 Lennard Dost

Nathalie van der Lely
22 juni 2017

'Werk keihard en blijf jezelf, speel geen rol en wees fulltime bezig met je praktijk.' Zijn advies voor de beginnende kunstenaar is typerend voor de freelance curator en kunstcriticus Lennard Dost uit Groningen die in 10 jaar tijd circa dertig projecten neerzette en 200 artikelen schreef, en sinds 2015 directeur is van Nieuwe Vide in Haarlem.



Lennard Dost, curator in residence in Das Weisse Haus, Wenen, 2014

Dost is als curator uitgenodigd voor de jaarlijkse Stroom Invest Week, dat in 2017 van 11 tot en met 15 september plaatsvindt. Het bestaat uit een programma van atelierbezoeken, een publieke gespreksavond, bezoeken aan Haagse kunstlocaties en informele ontmoetingen. Het doel van het Invest programma is een impuls te geven aan de kunstpraktijk door reflectie op het werk en de kunstenaars de gelegenheid te bieden een nationaal en internationaal netwerk op te bouwen.

Hij werd geboren in Veendam, groeide op in Winschoten, in een gezin waar sport centraal stond; de rondetijden van Rintje Ritsma, de voetbaltuitslagen van BV Veendam en basketball, waarover vader Dost in de Winschoter Courant berichtte, bepaalden de gesprekken aan de keukentafel. Vandaar dat de Voetbal International met balkunstenaar Arjen Robben net zo prominent als de Metropolis M op tafel ligt in Leiden, waar Dost nu woont.

De familie Dost is er één met ondernemers; logisch dat Lennard in 1997 Management Economie en Recht ging studeren in Groningen. Als fervent striplezer en –verzamelaar interesseerde hij zich steeds meer voor de beelden, de grafiek en de kunst en ging, na MER afgerond te hebben, Kunstgeschiedenis studeren, aan de Rijksuniversiteit (Groningen).

Opvallend is dat het ondernemersbloed kruipt waar het niet gaan kan. Lennard studeerde fulltime, stond achter de bar bij Vera Groningen waar hij ook de vrijwilligers coördineerde, was gitarist in een lokaal (onbekend) bandje en belandde via via bij 8weekly.nl, als recensent van muziek en strips.

Heeft 8weekly geen kunstafdeling? Lennard richt er een op en wordt sectiehoofd. Gaat de studie kunstgeschiedenis maar tot en met de jaren 70 en is er geen aandacht voor het beeldende van strips? Dan organiseert hij met studiegenoot Tsjalling Venema (nu galeriehouder) de expositie Reading the Drawing – Narrative in Contemporary Art and Comics in SIGN, Groningen.



Reading the Drawing – Narrative in Contemporary Art and Comics



met een portret van Johan Gustavsson

Hij ging er heel open in; hij zat niet in het kunstwereldje, ging af op zijn gevoel en werkte nauw samen met de kunstenaars. Lennard werd kunstcriticus voor De Volkskrant, hART (uit België) en Het Financieele Dagblad, adviseur bij het Mondriaan Fonds, lid van de Werkveldadviesraad van Academie Minerva, lid van bestuur Stichting Beeldverhaal Nederland en sinds mei 2015 is hij werkzaam als (artistiek) directeur bij Nieuwe Vide.



The hills are alive with the sound of muzak. 12 september 2015 – 8 november 2015.

Hoewel hij aanvankelijk zich aan de rand van de beeldende kunst, begaf, door activiteiten te organiseren rondom strips en muziekfotografie, zit hij nu – na 11 jaar curatorschap – tot aan zijn oren in het kunstwereldje. Toch blijft hij een 'outsider': van buiten de Randstad, wars van jargon en niet onder de indruk van 'grote namen'. Zijn eerste stap, voor het componeren van een expositie, blijft kijken en vragen: "word ik gegrepen door het werk?"

Hij werkt nog steeds nauw samen met kunstenaars en blijft aangetrokken tot kunst die engagement toont, naïef oogt en een romantische of melancholische grondtoon heeft. Maar zijn smaak is ook veranderd, performancekunst heeft hij leren waarderen.

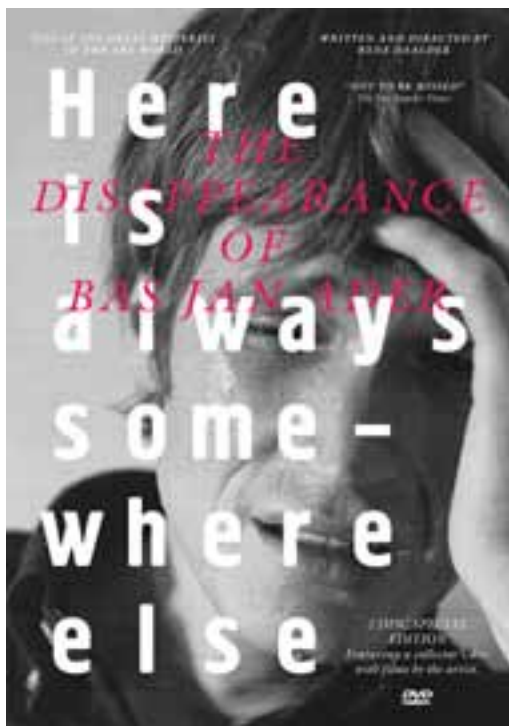
"In Search Of..." (2012) was een groot en veelzijdig project dat de methode en identiteit van Dost typeert, ook al is identiteit – in zijn ogen – geen vast maar een flexibel gegeven. Het project begon met de Dosts verwondering: Bas Jan Ader is een begrip, maar de stad Winschoten, waarin de wereldberoemde kunstenaar werd geboren en naar school ging, en waar Dost zelf vandaan komt, bleef ongemoeid. Het uitgangspunt voor "In Search Of..." was tweeledig: het kunstpubliek kreeg de regio Oost-Groningen te zien waar Bas Jan Ader opgroeide en de regio kreeg de kans om een deel van de eigen geschiedenis opnieuw te laten ervaren. Niet alleen werd de stad Winschoten erbij betrokken (een kunstenaars residency om vandaar uit onderzoek te doen in de omgeving), maar werden ook project exposities gecreëerd op plekken die directe betekenis hadden voor Bas Jan Ader. Zoals de hervormde kerk in Nieuw Beerta, waar zijn vader dominee was en het oude Groninger Museum (nu Academie Minerva) in Groningen, waar Ader een solo-expositie zou hebben gekregen als hij met zijn bootje was aangekomen. Exposities, filmprogramma's, educatieve projecten, interviews, lezingenprogramma's, muziek en een krant... de zoektocht naar Bas Jan Ader in 2012 werd behoorlijk omvangrijk.



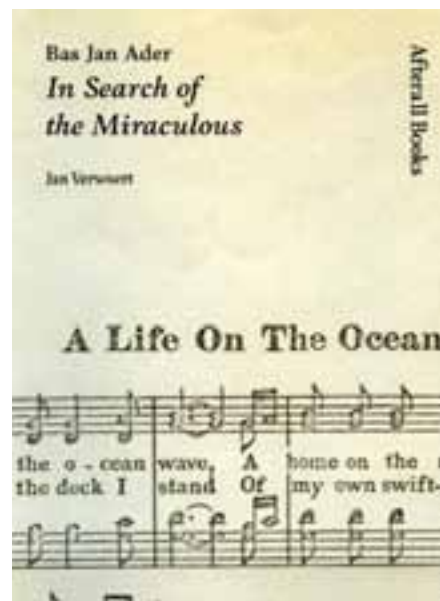
Lucky Fonz III trad in 2012 op in de kerk van Nieuw-Beerta



In Search of... #2 expositie Groningen, 2012. Foto ©Pepijn van den Broeke



onderdeel filmprogramma *In Search Of...*



onderdeel lezingenprogramma *In Search Of...*

Met zijn partner Mare van Koningsveld vormt hij ook een 'curatorenkoppel' dat in de periode 2009-2011 bij hun project Young Collectors programma – drie exposities en een symposium over kunstverzamelaars uit Nederland, Duitsland en België – in SIGN Groningen werd gesmeed. Van Koningsveld en hij zijn regelmatig in het buitenland te vinden; in 2014 waren zij curatorial resident in Valletta en in 2015 in Dublin. Tevens was Dost in datzelfde jaar curator in resident in Wenen en ging mee op een curatorenreis in Israël in 2017.



Lennard Dost en Mare van Koningsveld, *The Culture of Ageing*, 2015. Valletta

Voor de buitenlandse ervaringen zijn goede tests hoe jij je, als mens en curator, moet verhouden tot de ander en de andere cultuur. Wenen was nog het meest 'westers', maar voor een curator, uit Nederlandse turf ontgonnen, was het een uitdaging om te regelen wat je wilt zonder te direct te zijn. In Valletta viel de wil om er wat van te maken heel erg op, evenals de ondergeschiktheid van het land Malta, dat altijd onderdeel uitmaakte van andere landen. En als je in schuilkunst staat te bewonderen omdat deze ruimtes de meest goedkope expositieruimtes zijn in Jeruzalem, dan werkt dat ook behoorlijk ontvullend.



Conservatorenreis Israel 1-8 april 2017. Foto: Lennard Dost



Conservatorenreis Israel 1-8 april 2017. Foto: Lennard Dost

Het is een schat aan ervaring die door de (zelf)kritische Dost zelf het meest wordt gerelativeerd. Hard werken, een beetje mazzel, jezelf blijven en continu bezig zijn met allerlei aspecten van je vak. Dat bracht hem van Winschoten naar Valletta en van sport naar kunst, en vice versa.

"Work hard, stay true to yourself and fully committed to your practice. His advice for a beginning artist is typical for the freelance curator and art critical Lennard Dost from Groningen. In the past 10 years he developed about thirty projects and wrote 200 articles, and became in 2015 director of Nieuwe Vide in Haarlem.

Dost has been invited as a curator for the annual Stroom Invest Week, which takes place from 11 to 15 September in 2017. It consists of a program of studio visits, a public discussion evening, visits to The Hague's art venues and informal meetings. The purpose of the Invest program is to stimulate art practice by reflecting on the work and giving the artists the opportunity to build a national and international network. What does Dost has to offer as a curator? And how did his career start?

He was born in Veendam and grew up in Winschoten, in a family where sports were the main topic at the kitchen table; the laps of Rintje Ritsma (a Dutch long track speed skater), football club BV Veendam and basketball. It comes as no surprise that Arjen Robben (on the cover of Voetbal International) and Wendelien van Oldenborgh (on the cover of Metropolis M) are prominent on Dost's salon table in Leiden, his home town now.

The Dost family is filled with entrepreneurs and in 1997 Lennard started the study Management, Economics and Law in Groningen. Lennard was an avid strip reader and collector, he came increasingly interested in the images, graphics and art. After completing MER, he studies Art History at the University of Groningen.

Lennard was always busy; he studies fulltime, was volunteer at the Vera in Groningen, played guitar in a local (and unknown) band and became a reviewer of music and comics at 8weekly.nl. Lennard can spot an opportunity from miles away;

Does 8weekly have no art department? Lennard establishes one and becomes head of the department. And when he finds out that "Art History" pays no attention to the visual comics, he organizes with classmate Tsjalling Venema (no owns the gallery With Tsjalling) an exhibition in SIGN, Groningen, called *Reading the Drawing - Narrative in Contemporary Art and Comics*.

Lennard was very open – naïve perhaps – he wasn't from or in the art world, he followed his gut and worked (and works) closely with artists. He became an art critic at De Volkskrant, HART (from Belgium) and Het Financieele Dagblad and he was advisor at the Mondriaan Fund, member of the Minerva Academic Advisory Council, member of the Stichting Beeldverhaal The Netherlands. In may 2015 he became artistic director at Nieuwe Vide in Haarlem.

Although Lennard initially operated at the verge of the visual arts, by organizing activities around comics and music photography, he is now – being a curator for 11 years - up to his ears in the art world. Yet he remains an 'outsider': someone outside the Randstad, not using the 'artistic jargon' and isn't impressed by 'big artists'. His first step (in curating an exhibition) remains looking at a work and asking himself: "Does the work appeal to me?"

He still works closely with artists and remains attracted to engaged or naïve art with a romantic or melancholic tone. His preferences have also changed, he had learned to love performance art.

"In Search Of ..." (2012) was a big and versatile project that typifies the method and identity of Dost, even though identity - in his eyes - is not fixed but flexible. This project began with Dost's astonishment: Bas Jan Ader is a well known Dutch conceptual artist (also internationally well known), but Winschoten – the city in which the world-famous artist was born and grew up, and where Dost himself came from – was never mentioned.

The starting point for "In Search Of ..." was twofold: the audience got to see the East Groningen region where Bas Jan Ader grew up and the region was given the opportunity to re-experience a part of its own history. Not only was the city of Winschoten involved (an artist's residency to do research in the area), but project exhibitions were also created in places that were of significance to Bas Jan Ader. Like the reformed church in Nieuw Beerta, where his father was a preacher, and the old Groninger Museum (now Academy Minerva) where Ader would receive a solo exhibition but Ader was lost at sea in 1975, attempting to cross the Atlantic Ocean from the US to England in the smallest boat (Guppy 13) ever. (His deserted vessel was found off the coast of Ireland on 18 April 1976) Exhibitions, film programs, educational projects, interviews, lectures, music and a newspaper ... the *search for Bas Jan Ader* in 2012 became quite extensive.

Mare van Koningsveld and Lennard – living together – form a 'curator' couple. This couple was forged in the project Young Collectors - three exhibitions and a symposium about art collectors from the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium - in SIGN Groningen (2009-2011). In 2014 they were a curatorial resident in Valletta, in 2015 in Dublin. In addition, Dost was a resident of Vienna in 2015 and went on a curator trip in Israel in 2017.

"The foreign experiences especially are good test cases for you how you, as a human and curator, should relate to the other and the other culture. Vienna was still the most 'occidental' or 'western', but for a curator, deriving from Dutch peat, it was a challenge to get what you want, without being too direct or blunt."

In Valletta, what struck Dost the most, was the ambivalence of the will to thrive and the subordination of the country of Malta, that always belonged to other countries. And in Jerusalem Lennard was admiring art in several raid shelters, because those places are the most inexpensive exhibition spaces in Jerusalem. It was sobering, standing in a raid shelter.

Lennard has a ton of experience, but is the first one to put this into perspective. Work very hard (keep yourself busy with all sorts of aspects of your professional life), be true to yourself and – off course – a little bit of luck. Those ingredients brought Lennard from Winschoten to Valletta and from the sports to the arts, and vice versa.

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #2: Geir Haraldseth

Nathalie van der Lely

14 juli 2017

Geir Haraldseth is the second curator in the Stroom Invest Week Interview Series. He is the director of Rogaland Kunstsenter and based in Stavanger, Norway. Haraldseth holds a BA in Fine Arts from Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design and an MA in Curatorial Studies from Bard College. He has curated exhibitions at the National Museum of Art, Design and Architecture in Oslo, Fotogalleriet in Oslo, Akershus Kunstsenter in Lillestrøm, Vox Populi in Philadelphia, Teatro de Arena in Sao Paulo, Landings Project Space in Vestfossen, Bastard in Oslo, and Torpedo in Oslo. Haraldseth has contributed to several journals and magazines including the Exhibitionist, Kunstkritikk, Acne Paper, and Landings Journal.



Geir Haraldseth and Hege Tapio, director of the Board outside the Rogaland Kunstsenter (2016)

Can you tell us something about your activities in 2017?

In July 2017 we established an Independent Study Program at [Rogaland Kunstsenter](#). This is a continuation of our experimental summer program, which has been taking place since 2014. The Kunstsenter is also launching a book at the New York Art Book Fair focusing on the collaborative projects we have done since 2013, which the summer program is part of. In November I am very excited to go to Bogota and launch Luringen, an exhibition I have curated with Stina Högvist for the KUIR festival.

How did you become a curator?

I studied Fine Art at Central Saint Martins in London, but felt more at home working in the school library as an assistant, and running a contemporary art bookstore in Oslo. The bookstore featured events, pop-up exhibitions, and screenings, which was how I got into programming. I really admired the books we got from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and decided to apply for the Masters degree course in curating there.



From the Wilson Exercises (2014)

Which artists have influenced your life or way of thinking? And how?

Cindy Sherman was very influential on my interest in contemporary art. I found her work in a book in 1994 when I was doing an Art & Design course. The images grabbed me and fed me on so many levels. Later I would delve into her biography and use that as a curatorial stepping-stone to approach how the artist, her life and her work relate. Or not.

Which artist/art would you recommend to somebody and why?

I am a big fan of the programming at [Bridget Donahue's gallery](#) and [Lia Gangitano's Participant Inc.](#) Both galleries are in New York, but offer alternatives in a city that is increasingly homogenic. Lynn Herschman Leeson and Martine Syms' exhibitions at Donahue, a gallery that opened in 2015, provide perspectives on how technology impacts our lives. Participant Inc., which has been around since 2001, continues to put on the most exciting performance program. I recently saw M. Lamar there and sadly missed K8 Hardy and Raúl de Nieves' performance.

What kind of role does art play in your life and work?

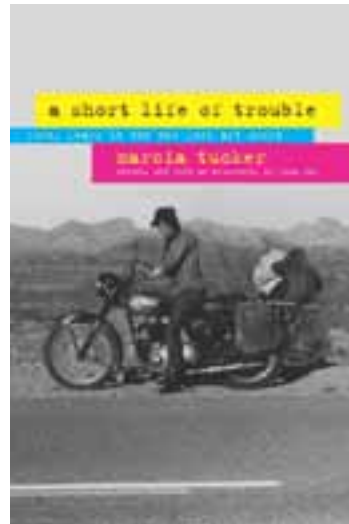
Art is my work, and I am very privileged to work with art and artists. It can however be a conundrum sometimes, because the art world is so large and encompasses many paradoxes. In Norway, art is supposed to be for everyone, as a social democratic tool supported by the state, but in the US, art is privileged and defined by the market, not the masses. Trying to define your own professional space also becomes a way of defining a life.

Which persons, in your profession, do you admire the most?

I had the privilege to attend Bard College when Marcia Tucker was still teaching there. She was the first female curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the founder of the New Museum. Her class at Bard was a very hands, heart, and brain on crash course to the art world. I strongly recommend her biography "A Short Life of Trouble, Forty Years in the New York Art World." I would also buy the WWMTD (What Would Marcia Tucker Do) bumper sticker. If I had a car.



Marcia Tucker



What is your idea of a good exposition or concept?

I like to experience and see things that I wouldn't do myself, and that might be something very systematic and academic, or something insane. I prefer things that aren't necessarily coherent, even though coherency has its charms, but exhibitions that blur lines. Those lines might be related to what the work of art is, where it is, how it is shown or how it intersects life, but there are so many unseen lines and conventions to cross, so blurring them tend to create exciting experiences.

What is your biggest professional achievement until now?

Being able to hold down a full time job as a curator? I was very happy working independently, teaching, and being a free agent, but I realized I wanted to establish a different type of platform for myself, my ideas, and my peers. I have been at the Kunstsenter for almost five years, and trying to piece together a program in a small city like Stavanger, that has value for the local artists, the city, the region, and the world has been quite nice. Working in Stavanger gives me the chance to rethink what an institution is and does. If I was working in a larger city, I do not think I would be allowed to experiment as much as and be so inclusive in our program and who we work with. For example, we are currently working with four different youth groups, something that developed organically and not as part of an attempt to court a specific segment. Now we help them with their programming and house their activities.



From Sei d Dã by Superstar Collective in the library (2017)



From concert with Mr Wallace in the library (2017)

What do you consider as the greatest drive/passion in your work?

I like doing new things, and trying to blur some lines institutionally. If I can bring some of the tools I used as an independent curator in the institution, I think that is something that drives me. For example, the first exhibition I did at the Kunstsenter, which was formed by the professional artists and craft artists in the region in 1978, was to challenge the hierarchies within the local art scene. I did this by inviting anyone who wanted to exhibit at the Kunstsenter to send in one work. There was no jury to judge, so every work was accepted. 268 artists took part; amateurs and professionals; old and young, and it was a good way to start a discussion about what the divisions and parameters are for the art world in a small region relies on. These types of exhibitions were renamed project-exhibitions by staff, to differentiate from the 'regular' exhibitions.



From Inngang: Åpen Dør (2013)

What do you love most about your work?

I love the flexibility of working in a smaller institution, so we can go from one thing to the other in quick

succession and work on a project in a very flexible way. We can whip out an experimental summer school program one minute and have a performance festival on an island the other!

As a curator: What is your biggest merit? And what is your biggest flaw?

I feel really good about creating the contemporary art library at the kunstsenter. It is my own collection of printed matter, but making it available to the public is something I am proud of. It is not a conventional exhibition project, but I hope it is, or will be, integral to a lot of artists's life and work. As a curator you do not only make exhibitions, but you can facilitate conversations, provide opportunities and hopefully connect people. The library is also a meeting place as well as a resource center for knowledge about contemporary art and printed matter. My biggest flaw is that I do too much, that too many projects are floating around. It is so hard to say no, but it is also hard to balance a life. I still need to sleep.



From Plot: Presentation of Cory Arcangel in the library (2016)

What's still on your curators' bucket list?

I want to figure out how to contribute to the art world in the best way possible. I think that involves thinking about where the art world should be in 10-15 years. This might be a huge project, or it might be tiny. Tucker created her own museum to address some of the shortcomings of the art world, and to define her own space, but I don't necessarily think the world needs another museum. Maybe something completely different!

What kind of advice do you want to give a young (or beginning) artist?

I will go with something Tucker once told me, in a slightly different version: Go with your guts and do it. You need to do something in order to have something to think about.

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #3 Valentin Diaconov

Mirjam Verloop
28 juli 2017

Valentin Diaconov (1980) is the third curator in the Stroom Invest Week Interview Series. He is a Moscow based curator and editor. Valentin Diaconov has a PhD in Culture Studies and has written a post-graduate thesis about the changes in Soviet cultural policy in the aftermath of Stalin's death. Since November 2016 he has been a curator at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow.



Congo Art Works: Popular Painting, Image credit: Ivan Erofeev

Valentin, could you introduce yourself a bit more?

Sure! I started as an art critic in the early 2000s and worked for several Russian-language publications, contributed to artinfo.com, artnet.de and Frieze. As a curator I have worked independently since 2012, staging shows in state museums and private institutions. My primary area of concern, and this is something I share with a wide variety of colleagues, is the political, social and physical status of an artwork in the contemporary stream of content.

Can you clarify this?

I live and work in a country where the intellectual class is singularly obsessed with ways that art can be instrumentalized as a political tool, either fighting the oppression (Russian post-slavery literature, e.g. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy) or imagining ways of creating new oppressive regimes through either emancipation of the working and peasant forces (Constructivists) or selling the narrative of a new and just society (Socialist Realism).

This dialectic of oppression and emancipation of artists having degrees of complicity in certain outcomes (political terror, neoliberal selective permissiveness), is always somewhere on the table, and that is why I am always interested in big projects and big gestures that surround the Erinnerungskultur in Germany, for example, – a great and relatively fresh instance of this is David Chipperfield's renovation of Haus der Kunst in Munich. Or how artists from the so-called BRIC countries, the neighbouring nations, and Africa retrospectively interpret modernity as something that either is always a tool of oppression or exists in independent forms all along, beside the colonizers' version of what it is to be civilized. So yes, memory and technology is something that I always take into account.

What are you currently working on?

I started at Garage in November 2016 and had since then organized a show Congo Art Works: Popular Painting, originally curated by Sammy Baloji and Bambi Ceuppens.

Garage has an English-language series on Russian art and institutions, Exhibit Russia is an example. Even before I started working here, there was this idea of preparing a book on Russian performance art from the 1910s to the present day, so I am now overseeing and writing the overview parts for this, trying to include more information on performance as an urban practice, laws that policed common space and other information that gets usually overlooked in favour of individual biographies.

I am also co-curating a conference on artistic archives. This conference, Archive: Savior, Inventor, Witness, was also there before. Me and my co-curator Anastasia Mityushina invite people who know about the archive's instability in times of censorship, terror or crisis, and will address these histories.

Finally, a show I'm doing – and the idea originated with me – is about, in a word, clothes outside the fashion context. So I'll be looking at how clothes and garments have functioned artistically to serve as cultural identity marks, class identity research, ground zero for abstraction, and a metaphor for masses of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century.



Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Image credit: Sergey Norin, Flickr

You work as an editor, a curator, co-organise a conference, you work on a variety of projects and in different fields of art. In what way do they differ? Or they don't at all?

Yes, they differ as processes (writing is the loneliest job, but the most singularly rewarding), but there's a common quality to them in that I try to make them as instructive and rich in context as possible.

Do you come from a family where art played an important role as well? Or is it something that became more important when you started studying?

I was born in 1980, five years before Perestroika, and politics was obviously a huge topic in the household, we got a front row seat to gradual – and in 1991, dramatic – introduction of capitalism. English was a second language – my mum is a translator and my dad had a CD shop for the rock fans and weirdos. Less art than album artwork, really, in the house, so my first aesthetic experiences started with Creation Rebel's Psychotic Junkanoo cover. Art as a historical concept began to interest me only in the university.

What made you decide to study in the field of arts and culture?

I can remember a picture of a boy opening the door of his room to find himself in space that my parents plastered over my bed when I was a kid, that started a huge investigation into how a static image can change meaning over time (and moods). But studying as practice came later, I think, when I tried making an image and found myself more drawn to the question "Why am I doing this?" than to the question of "What should I do?"

Do you remember somebody you met at the university or something you did that still inspires you today?

I think going to Peterhof, a tsar residence close to Saint-Petersburg, and realizing that there are total artistic environments that are equal parts architecture, design and art was crucial for me.



Is that something you want other people to experience as well? Oh, definitely. We still owe a lot of our notions, stereotypes and opinions on how art works to aristocracy's glorifying itself, so to delve into the source is instructive, whether it's in Russia or Milan or wherever.

The Garage Museum of Contemporary Art is a place for people, art and ideas to create history. It was founded in 2008 and is the first philanthropic institution in Russia to create a comprehensive public mandate for contemporary art. It is a major art institute located in the Gorky Park in Moscow. It houses an expanding collection of modern and contemporary art, founded upon the private collections of founders Dasha Zhukova and Romin Abramovich, and it organises temporary exhibitions, events and educational programs to reflect current developments in Russian and international culture. The museum wants to create opportunities for public dialogue in Moscow.

The Garage Museum's program reflects the current developments in Russian and international culture. Could the museum be located elsewhere in the world?

I think that we walk the line between being an international institution and working for the local audience. We try to make these goals not mutually exclusive, and in this respect we could be in another place that has the same amount of interest in and awareness of contemporary art and a similar level of art industry as Moscow.

Could you name some places with that same amount of interest that you'd like to collaborate with in the near future?

We have a lot of partner projects with different institutions all over the (Western) world, but we usually tend to work with established museums to learn from them. We have a David Adjaye show from the Art Institute of Chicago, a Raymond Pettibon retrospective from the New Museum (New York), Congo Art Works was originally shown in BOZAR (Brussels), and so on. But I wouldn't put a collaboration with a smaller institution off the table.

From your experience what would your advice be to beginning artists? I think that my advice to beginning artists would be: the art world is a very safe place fenced by a huge amount of privilege, so it is always instructive to jump over this fence or at least acknowledge its' existence.

Finally, what are your plans for the future? What do you do in let's say five years from now?

Hopefully doing more shows, writing more books, learning how to drive and roller skate, and collaborating globally!

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #4 Alejandra Labastida

Bob van der Sterre

Alejandra Labastida is Associate Curator at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC) in Mexico City. She curated projects which involved artists like Mladen Stilinovic and Vincent Meessen. She is going to tell us more about curating contemporary art in Mexico.



Alejandra Labastida

Curators in The Hague work in a city with hardly halve a million inhabitants. I can hardly imagine what it is like to work as a curator in a big metropolis like Mexico City, with almost nine million inhabitants.

'The national panorama of the art scene is still very much centralized in Mexico City. Although some other big cities have started to make noise too. For example, Oaxaca in the south, Guadalajara and Monterrey in the industrial north. The projects showed at MUAC sometimes can't be presented in another city simply because of the presence of nudity. So there is a long way to go...



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In the Netherlands there are many budgetary issues in the art scene. Are the art budgets in Mexico sufficient enough to do your work as a curator properly?

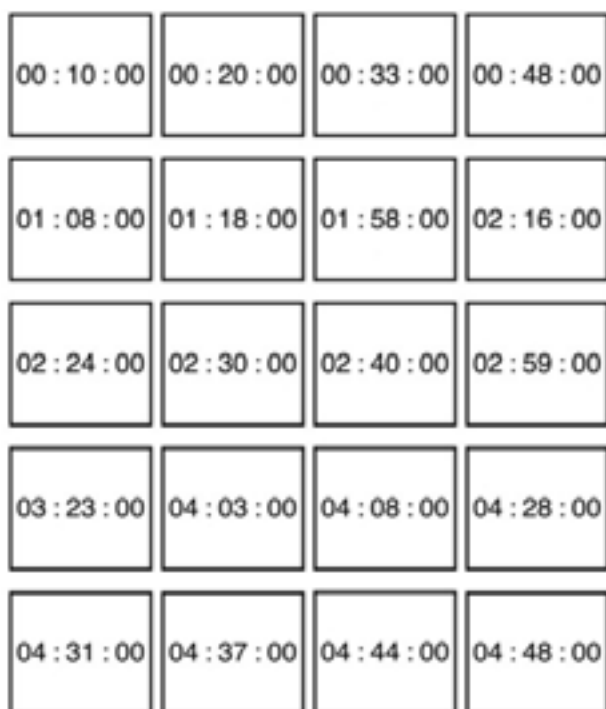
'We are in the middle of a crisis, I believe shared with most countries, where cultural budgets are almost disappearing. The state institutions are literally closing down, people are getting fired. Although publicly funded as well, we are in a slightly better situation at MUAC but are depending more and more on private funding.

'Needless to say, this involves a deep transformation and endangers our autonomy. The pressure to include 'blockbuster exhibitions' with record breaking numbers of visitors is here to stay. We try to arrive at an equilibrium between these demands and our interests.

'Trying to look at the bright side, some interesting phenomena have happened. For example, these blockbuster projects have brought a new kind of audience. When they are visiting they see a kind of politically and socially engaged art they would have never seen otherwise.

'I think there are two sides to the problem. On the one hand the state has ceased to give priority to culture. But on the other hand it's about the structures of self exploitation that we maintain as cultural workers. It is astonishing how even in the most precarious conditions we continue to produce work, renouncing our fees – both artists and curators – for the sake of the project.

'We need to find models of professional collective self-regulation (in the words of Andrea Fraser). That is not only my opinion, but also that of many other key figures who have insisted on this. For example the aforementioned Andrea Fraser, but also Hito Steyerl, and also important initiatives like WAGE have contributed to this necessary reconfiguration of our labour conditions.'



Picture from the guide Arrecife. Colectivo AM © MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, México, D.F.

“Arrecife [Reef] lasted 45 hours. When the timer stopped, marking the end of the last hour, the orchestrated sterility and silence of the white cube were shot through with a round of applause that lasted a long time. Maybe there weren't many of us there, but the acoustics of the hall multiplied our number. Now the stage wins, I told myself.”

(From Alejandra's essay 'To Be or Not to Be? No, Thank You1')

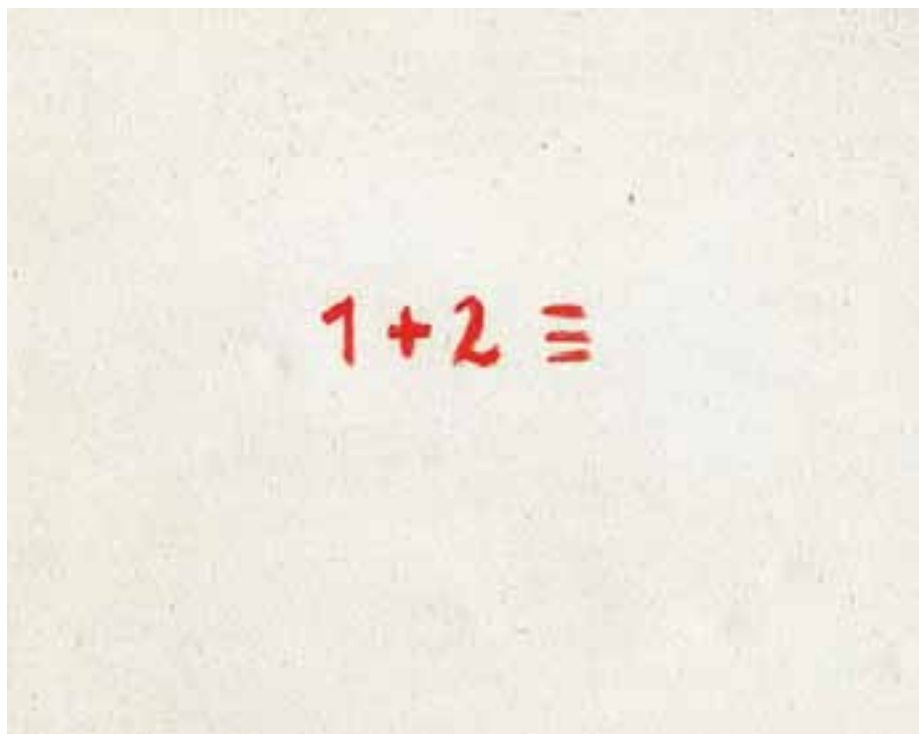
I have noticed you write a lot of essays about art. It makes me wonder: do you feel more an essayist than a curator, or are those one and the same to you?

'I come from an academic family and studied History. I got interested in curatorial practice to escape the academic world and its tight rules and hierarchies, which felt like a metaphorical desert to me. Still, at first I thought they were one and the same, that there was no 'serious' curatorial work if there was no text. Now I know sometimes both can be true.

'Fortunately, my preconceptions have loosened up. My experience is that curatorial work is very different depending on each project. Sometimes it is more practical and sometimes more theoretical, many times it is both. Sometimes, even if you've worked on the whole project, you are not the best person to write about it. That doesn't demerit your curatorial input!'

There are a lot of European artists whose exhibitions you've curated, for example Mladen Stilinović. Could you tell us how Stilinović' death, hardly a year later, has affected your work as a curator?

'A few years back I was commissioned to produce an exhibition focused on Eastern Europe. I invited the Croatian curatorial collective named DELVE. It was an amazing exhibition! I just clicked with each of them on a more personal level.



Picture Mladen Stilinovic', 1 + 2, 2005 [Cat. 2], from the Guide 1+2 Mladen Stilinovic'
© MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, México, D.F .

'Since then I have created a personal interest and relationship with artists and curators in Croatia, making exhibitions with Croatian artists in Mexico and bringing Latin-American artists to Zagreb.

'Mladen's death was so sad. We were planning to invite him to do one of his lecture performances. That would have been such an honour. Curator Branka Stipančić, his wife, said to me recently he was so excited to come to his first big show in Latin-America, but his illness prevented this eventually. Still, a lot of young Mexican artists that didn't know his work got to see it.'

"Although he is considered to be a conceptual artist, Stilinovic's work is never cold or rational; rather, it moves on a humorous, ironic register whose simple gestures appeal to affect and produce experiences that insist on personal responsibility."

(From Alejandra's essay '1 + 2 or, How To Manipulate That Which Manipulates You')

And how about Vincent Meessen?

'I saw Vincent Meessen's work in Berlin in a Catherine David show, while participating in the Berlin Biennale curatorial workshop. Cuauhtémoc Medina, MUAC's chief curator, saw it elsewhere too. So when the possibility of working with him arose in a discussion, I immediately asked to work on the project.'

I would like to end this interview with a question about negotiation. In an interview you said once that curatorial work is 'all about allowing a space of negotiation more freely and autonomous'. Could you tell me more about the role of mediator between art-consumers and artists that a curator can play, according to you?

'Curatorial work in my experience cannot be divorced from a high degree of energy invested in negotiation.

'There is negotiation between the artist and the institution, between the pressures of the financial realm and the possibilities of the work, basically between everybody's fantasies. The artist's, the institution's, the trustee's or donor's, the public's, the educational curator's, and of course, your own.

'Normally you play the reality check card but if you are lucky you get to play the let's go all the way card.'

Links

[Interview Alejandra Labastida on Youtube \(Spanish\)](#)

[Alejandra Labastida at Independent Curators International](#)

[1 + 2 or, How To Manipulate That Which Manipulates You](#)

[Arrecife / Reef / Collettivo AM](#)

[Meiro Koizumi: Retrato de un silencio fallido](#)

[Vincent Meessen: Mi Ultima Vida](#)

[Camel Collective: La distancia entre Pontresina y Zermatt es la misma que de la Zermatt a Pontresina](#)

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #5 Edward Gillman

Mirjam Verloop

Edward Gillman is the fifth curator in the Stroom Invest Week Interview Series. He is an artist-director of Auto Italia South East, an artist-run organisation and studio in London, alongside founding member Kate Cooper and Marianne Forrest. The organisation, founded in 2007, produces and commissions new work and organises a public program.



Loss Leader, Edward Gillman, Marianne Forrest and Pablo Jones-Soler (2017). Image courtesy Auto Italia and the artists.

Edward, can you tell more about Auto Italia and your role?

Auto Italia is an artist run project and studio that is currently run by three artists, Kate Cooper, Marianne Forrest and myself. We're in some ways unusual in the visual arts scene in London as the organisation performs a dual role as both a framework for commissioning new projects and exhibitions as well as receiving commissions to produce new artwork under the collaborative name of [Auto Italia](#). We see the project as an artistic studio where we produce projects as a group but also oversee a programme in a public project space. Historically our work has often centred around themes of alternative labour model models and modes of production, grass-roots and collective working, offering new spaces and gender politics. These themes sit at the centre of both our public programme and creative projects, and the way in which we work with other practitioners always engages with an idea around what is possible through collaboration. We're very creatively involved within our public programme; in the process of bringing artists together to produce new work as well as often operating as a collaborator within the work. This role within the programme is sometimes ambiguous and we enjoy that – at times we're very engaged in projects from the inception of new research and ideas, at others through operating as an artistic collaborator, and other playing host to artists and artist groups that we really admire.

We also receive commissions from other galleries and institutions to produce new work under the name of Auto Italia and we will often use those commissions to work with people within our public program again or to take questions that we want to explore further. So in some ways the programme becomes a model to think about research and ideas, testing things out that can be then further explored within our collaborations. There's a tension that we find really interesting between 'being an organisation' and 'being an artist'. In many ways we're interested in a flexibility in how we use Auto Italia through those two positions, shape shifting between being a community, an organisation, an artist, a collaboration and a space.



Dream Babes (2016). Courtesy Victoria Sin and Auto Italia. Photo: Holly Folconer.

Are you working with British emerging artists only?

Not at all – and many of our collaborators are practitioners that may not always produce work under the guise of ‘artist’. Auto Italia has always engaged with questioning what it means for artists to have space at a moment in London where studios are entirely inaccessible to younger artists. Our collaborators might also be music video producers, coders, software developers, or other commercial producers alongside producing independent projects we may recognise within the cannon of ‘contemporary art’. We’ve always invited the skills and formats these artists are learning into the programme, exploring what alternative production and distribution formats could be for artists.

We reach out internationally and have a really strong interest in bringing artists and groups into our programme to work alongside a community of artists here in London. I think that being a shifting and evolving group of artists ourselves, many of the artists at the helm of Auto Italia over the years have been interested in reaching out to other artists’ groups operating in London and beyond. Most recently this has included presenting Metahaven’s first solo exhibition in London, a new commission by South African collective NTU; also their first UK solo show, and Syria Mobile Film Festival. The archive is really rich, and artists that have led the project in the past including Marleen Boschen, Richard John-Jones, Rachel Pimm and Amanda Dennis have all used the framework of Auto Italia to ask similar questions surrounding collective practice.

Our studio practice is always an exciting opportunity to reach out to new communities of artists too – and we often bring these artists back into our London programme. Most recently we presented a new body of work Rogue Agents at Firstdraft, Sydney. We’re already bringing these collaborators into our programme, with Angela Goh presenting a new dance performance work at Auto Italia in August 2017.



Information Skies, Metahaven (2017). Installation view The Sprawl (Propaganda About Propaganda). Image courtesy Auto Italia and the artists. Photo: Corey Bartle-Sanderson and Theo Cook.



Rogue Agents, Angela Goh and Bhenji Ra. Firstdraft, Sydney (2017). Image courtesy Auto Italia and the artists. Photo: Catherine McElhone

Auto Italia is now based in London, do you ever think of moving to a location outside London or even outside the UK in the future?

The climate in the UK in many respects is becoming more challenging so we have often asked ourselves this question. Years of conservative austerity has decimated a huge range of social provision in the UK – including arts funding – and there's now a big question mark around how Brexit may affect the scene here in London. So there are compelling arguments for Auto Italia to shape shift and take a new form and structure somewhere else.

We have a certain level of privilege being in the UK/London because we've been regularly funded by Arts Council England since 2012. We don't receive a enormous settlement, but it does give us a core organisational structure through which we can make Auto Italia a job. Auto Italia is now in its tenth year which is really quite phenomenal as it is so difficult to maintain space and momentum due to how extreme the neoliberal city has become. There really aren't many examples of artist-led organisations and project spaces that have been able to continue without having to shift their focus and engage with the art market as selling galleries – as the market is so dominant here in London.

In some ways the practical consideration of survival sits at the centre of the discourse we produce. Moving from being a squatted space in Peckham through a number of donated spaces over the years, Auto Italia's programme has reflected our own position asking what it means for artists to produce work within a condition of total precarity.

What can more established institutions or organisations learn from Auto Italia and the way it is working?

It is interesting to see how large-scale institutions are operating at the moment in the UK and how they're responding to government austerity – and thinking about how its important to interrogate how this affects creative practice. There's a huge focus within austerity on value for money – bigger audience numbers and financial growth equal creative and artistic value. This narrative sits right at the heart of arts and culture at the moment: the government wants an immediate financial return for its investment into the arts – its really as simple as that.

Tate Modern has tripled in size. Institutions are modelling themselves to attract philanthropic income in the American model. You even see this affecting the working practices of small- to mid-scale institutions, with pressure to obtain capital assets that can be monetised to ensure longer-term financial stability. The older charity model for arts organisations is becoming increasingly unfavourable.

At Auto Italia we're always keen to resist that. We of course want to grow and to have long-term financial stability, however we always ask at what cost? Who are the stakeholders, partners and organisations that could enable that and how might these collaborations change the critical position from which we make work?



Hailweed (2016). Installation view at Auto Italia, London. From left to right: Suzanne Treister, HFT The Gardener, Sryia Mobile Film Festival. Photo: Theo Cook

How did you get involved with Auto Italia?

I started to hang out at Auto Italia whilst I was studying at Central Saint Martins. Auto Italia has a big history with CSM, with two of the founding members also coming from the 4D pathway. After a while I started helping out with different projects and it grew from there. That is how we all got involved and that is important to Auto Italia. It comes from this ethos of community building, building networks and bringing emerging artists

into the network. Whether it is more full time, or as a freelancer, a regularly participating artist, or a student that helps out.

Why did you decide to study in art?

I studied at Central Saint Martins because what it offered me more than anything was a framework through which you could ask questions differently. I didn't really know what CSM was until I came to London at 18, but learning more about it I really fell in love with the idea of its history – it became a sort of object of desire to me with all of these incredible designers and producers coming from there. The idea that Versace was sponsoring people's graduate collections and that artists like MIA had done stints within the Fine Art course it just felt really glamorous and exciting.

The course I did actually ended up being really centred around pretty hard core conceptualism which was a slightly different experience to what I expected – my interests have always been fairly pop so I sometimes wondered if I ended up at Saint Martins by chance because of this.

Is there something you want to learn, work-related?

Every time we do a project we find that we learn so much from the people we work with. In many ways the programme is a tool for us to learn and research forms of discourse and practice we want to know more about as artists. I think this defines us as different from 'curators'. We don't curate a programme because we're an expert, researcher or PHD candidate with a wealth of knowledge on a particular topic – its more democratic than that.

Could you name something that really inspires you?

What inspires me at the moment in London is people that are able to open up grassroots spaces. It is really difficult to describe just how extreme the situation is in London. The space is limited and it's not only a problem for artists, but also for the club scene, queer communities and other minority groups.

What is your advice to beginning artists?

There is something I always say when I do talks or lectures at universities (and being a relatively recent graduate myself, it's really pertinent to my experience of being young in London) : "be strategic". Graduated artists are really exited about leaving university, finding a cool space, programming work, and finding a way to produce work themselves.

This hedonistic 90's mentality about the city is still really dominant but since squatting was made illegal, this way of being in the city is almost impossible. There's still this narrative around London being this open free where you can occupy old warehouses and build communities but it's just not true.

I think it is now more important than ever to think about a practise being more flexible and the different guises you can use to sustain making work – and it's this that is ultimately a really exciting proposal.

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #6 Carol Yinghua Lu

Bob van der Sterre

24 augustus 2017

Carol Yinghua Lu is a curator and a critic, working in China as well as in the West. We spoke about writing essays, the art market and, inevitably, the differences between China and the West. 'The yizhi of a curator must be visible in an exhibition.'



Carol Yinghua Lu

You are a curator but also an art critic. You also write essays about art for Frieze, e-flux journal, The Exhibitionist, Yishu and Tate. I wonder: do you feel more of a writer than a curator?

'I don't think the two are contradictory to or in competition with each other. They are both platforms for creative practice.'

As a curator, what are the requirements for an artwork to be selected by you for an exhibition?

'It varies from project to project. There is no particular requirement but it depends very much on the theme of an exhibition I am working on.'

'Personally, I prefer artworks of depth and complexity and tend to work with artists with a rich body of works and thoughts developed over an extended period of time.'



The 7th Shenzhen Biennale: Accidental Message: Art is Not a World, Not a System, co-curated with Liu Ding, Su Wei © Carol Yinghua Lu

The art market nowadays has a huge influence on art. About the Biennale in Venice you said: 'We felt that the whole Biennale itself was very informed by the art market. It had a very strong synergy with what is favored in the market and gallery scene.' As a curator, how do you deal with the commercial interests of auction houses, museums, the public?

'The art market has an impact on the state of the art system of which I am a part of. But curatorially and intellectually, there is little impact the art market has on me.

'I work with artists regardless of their market performances or presence.

'The art market has its own denominators of value but they don't apply to my way of working.'

Speaking about the art market: the Chinese art scene has developed massively since the 1980s. How can you, as an insider, characterize the evolution of Chinese art since?

'It's hard to characterize such a development within the space of one answer. There were both internal and external motivations for the development of art in China in the 1980s but this sudden boost of energy had its roots in the decades leading up to it.

'1989 was a shift in dynamics. Since then, the commercial aspect has become more prominent, which did a lot of good in terms of providing visibility to art, but also a lot of damage to the practice of art.'



The 7th Shenzhen Biennale: Accidental Message: Art is Not a World, Not a System, co-curated with Liu Ding, Su Wei © Carol Yinghua Lu

'Chinese art has a lot of particular characters rooted in its historical process, political conditions and cultural specificities. We in China are still a long way away in terms of understanding what is Chinese art and what is the foundation of it.

'For people like me who work in this field, the most urgent task is to develop a better understanding of ourselves and to learn to communicate the nuances and complexities better.'



Exhibition view of Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art I, co-curated by Liu Ding & Carol Yinghua Lu © Carol Yinghua Lu

You said: 'The yizhi [willpower, BS] of a curator must be visible in an exhibition.' Do Chinese curators have a different view on curatorship in general? And how do you deal with censorship, especially when you notice the differences?

'I don't think Chinese curators are different from curators who work in other contexts, in terms of curatorial approaches and practices. But I think Chinese curators face very specific issues at home such as Chinese art history and the social political context in China.

'In terms of censorship, I always remind myself and my colleagues of not censoring ourselves. We can only manage ourselves and it is crucial not to get into the mindset of guessing what would be censored and avoiding those altogether.

'It's important to try and learn what is possible.'

Are events like China 8 (an exhibition in 2015 all over Germany with works from 120 Chinese artists) important for the emancipation of Chinese art in the West?

'China 8 was a governmental event. I didn't see the shows so it's hard for me to comment on the exhibitions from a curatorial perspective.

'But as an event, it gave many people an impression that the government could potentially offer major opportunities for artists abroad, on conditions that the artworks being produced would give an impression of being contemporary but not question or criticize anything.

'I am not sure how China 8 was perceived in Germany but I am doubtful that such an event is positive to the art community in China.

'In exchange, Germany will make a series of exhibitions in China to present German art in China. This is a governmental operation. I don't think it has much to do with art in the end.'



The 9th Gwangju Biennale: Back to Individual Experiences © Carol Yinghua Lu



You said about the Biennale that it presented a very strong European view. Can you, as a curator, do anything about that perspective?

'I don't think I can change that necessarily but it doesn't stop me from wanting to reflect on it critically and examine it from a perspective such as mine that is not European.

'The Venice Biennale is a European Biennale after all. All I can do is to consider it critically and to understand why we have all fallen for such a Euro-centric perspective in the first place.'

You also said that 'the west' and 'the east' are not relevant as terms.

'From the perspective of cultural studies, such terms of the west and the east are still relevant in terms of understanding the specificities of each context and how these specificities manifest themselves in art.

'But as an individual practitioner, be it an artist or a curator, one shouldn't always think on the basis of such general terms.

'As I have expressed in many of my essays and curatorial projects, it's the individual practice that merits attention and discussion. There are art systems, cultures, but in the end, art is made by individual artists and should be considered on individual terms.

'But as individuals, we are naturally bound by many specificities of our cultural upbringings, social context and historical processes.

'However, your horizon should be to think as an individual. And then to imagine the possibility of the individual to transcend existing categories and boundaries.'



Salon Salon: Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile - A Beijing Perspective © Carol Yinghua Lu

You said you became fed up of speaking at conferences, because you felt China was singled out as a curious social, political, and cultural phenomenon to study and exhibit. Can you elaborate on that?

'Looking back, when I talked about being fed up of speaking about China as a curious social phenomenon, it was around 2008.

'Curiously enough, my work in the last few years has been very much focused on considering and dealing with Chinese art history and I am back to talking about China as a particular situation, but armed with hopefully a deeper understanding of what it is.

'But my primary aim is not to communicate that particularity but to understand it myself. I was fed up with a very shallow way of discussing China back then but today, I find myself learning to understand and to speak about it in a more nuanced and complex way.'



Salon Salon: Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile - A Beijing Perspective © Carol Yinghua Lu

You worked as a curator in many different countries that each have a different political and social infrastructure. Can you tell us something about the most striking differences you've experienced?

'What is interesting is that having worked within several different political and social contexts, I tend to find more similarities than differences.

'After all, an infrastructure is created by human beings and as humans, we share a lot more than we differ.

'At the end of these different experiences, all I can remember and take to heart are the many visionary and committed individuals who I have worked with and was supported by.'

Links

[Essays from Carol Yinghua Lu at Frieze](#)

['Accidental Conceptualism' at e-flux \(essay\)](#)

['From the anxiety of participation to the process of de-internationalization' at e-flux \(essay\)](#)

['Crimes without a scene: Qian Weikang and the new measurement group' at e-flux \(essay with Liu Ding\)](#)

['From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism' at Tate \(essay with Liu Ding\)](#)

['The missing frontline' at e-flux \(essay\)](#)

[China 8 in Art Radar Journal](#)

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #7 Thiago de Paula Souza

Nathalie van der Lely

5 september 2017

Thiago de Paula Souza lives and works in São Paulo and is a member of the 10th Berlin Biennale curatorial team. At the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo de Paula Souza joined the Accra Study Days team and was part of the Bienal's Oficina de Imagem Política. Thiago collaborated with lanchonete.org, an artist-led cultural platform focused on daily life and progressive actions in contemporary cities with São Paulo as a reference point.



He co-created We Cannot Build What We Cannot First Imagine (WCB WCFI), a visionary platform that gathers works and perspectives from racialized artists and thinkers. His current research concerns race relations, African and Afro-Brazilian art, and the depiction of art from Africa and the diaspora in the German-speaking context.

Can you tell us something about your activities in 2017?

This year I'm dedicating most of my time working with Jota Mombaça with whom I co-created We Cannot Build What We Cannot First Imagine (WCB WCFI), a visionary platform that gathers works and perspectives from racialized artists and thinkers and for the upcoming 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art that will take place next year and I am a member of the curatorial team.

Which artists have influenced your life or way of thinking? And how?

The idea of what we understand as visual art came to my life quite "late", it's a very specific world. I'd say that during most part of my life other "kinds of art" touched me and influenced the way I think now, especially music. I could easily say that Racionais MC's, a hip hop group from São Paulo and Jorge Ben Jor's albums from late 60's and early 70's, that my parents used to listen every weekend were really important in my formation. Also the period of time I worked at Museu AfroBrasil, a place that most part of the collection is not considered part of art history cannon and my visits to the 31st Bienal de São Paulo still influence me especially because they helped me, they allowed my mind to think with and beyond art.



Jorge Ben Jor, 1969

Which artist/art would you recommend to somebody and why?

I really like Dineo Seshee Bopape, Donna Kukama and Clara Ianni's work. Each of them in her own way proposes challenges ways of reading history.



Dineo Seshee Bopape, "Mabu Mubu, Mmu", 2017.

Presented at Palazzo Contarini Polignac for the Future Generation Prize exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Photo: Sergei Illin



Clara Ianni, Circle, 2016. Video Still (of Video Installation)



Donna Kukama, B: I, Too (2016) | Performance at Live Uncertainty, 32nd Sao Paulo Bienal, Brazil

Which persons, in your profession, do you admire the most?

I learn(ed) a lot of (and working with) Denise Ferreira da Silva (Director, Associate Professor, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice), Gabi Ngcobo (Gabi Ngcobo, curator 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art) and Jota Mombaça (artist)



Jota Mombaça

What is your idea of a good exposition or concept?

I don't think there's a rule but it's important to organize your ideas and what understand story do you want to tell.

What is your biggest professional achievement until now?

I'm a member of the 10th Berlin Biennale curatorial team now. It's a very important platform to reflect about the world and the contemporary art.

What do you love most about your work?

This necessity, the possibility of learning and unlearning. Meeting people from different backgrounds and find ways of working together.

As a curator: What is your biggest merit? And what is your biggest flaw?

Of course there are things I'm better doing than others, but I don't like the idea of merit// flaw, that's why I believe in working together, working as a team.

What's still on your curators' bucket list?

There's still a lot of people I wanna co-work with. But right now as I mentioned before my mind is focused on WCB WCFI and on the 10th Berlin Biennale.

What kind of advise do you want to give a young (or at the beginning of his career) artist?

I'm still very young too and I think most of the artist that I am going to meet come from a very different background than mine, nevertheless I think it's really important to try to create connections with artists, thinkers who are also working beyond art or at least it makes a lot of sense for my practice.

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #8 Maarten Spruyt

door Bob van der Sterre

7 september 2017

Maarten Spruyt has been a curator since the nineties. He has worked with the biggest museums in the Netherlands, including Boijmans van Beuningen, the Gemeentemuseum and the Van Gogh Museum. It all happened spontaneously because he “makes something visible that others do not see”. “My work has a lot of subtlety to it that you do not immediately see but that you can feel.”



Maarten Spruyt © Adriaan van der Ploeg

Your career as a curator started in 1993 with an exhibition in the Central Museum Utrecht. Can you give an impression of how you have grown as a curator since then?

‘Your knowledge of how a museum works from the inside grows day by day. For example, you realize that for your exhibition to open, you only have two weeks to build it. You start thinking: why don’t all of you just work a little longer, even on weekends, for example. But you forget that the technicians go from one exhibition to another and a new one will be opened two weeks later.

‘And every museum has its own rules. The surveillance has its way of doing things, the canteen staff wants it to be done their way, and all of this is different again from how the director wants it to go. Dealing with all these layers I think is fun and interesting, but it can also be very exhausting.



Ode aan de Nederlandse mode – Gemeentemuseum 2015 © Alice de Groot

'I used to have absolutely no idea of something like 'lux values' [measure of intensity of light, BS] of the prints, drawings and clothing, needed for its preservation. Or visitors who do not know how to behave in relation to art, just walking across a stage... I can go on for a while.'



Ode aan de Nederlandse mode – Gemeentemuseum 2015 © Alice de Groot

Your past is inextricably linked to fashion. Do you have the idea that the transition from fashion styling to setting up art exhibitions has been a natural process?

'Absolutely! Fashion is fun for its spirit of the times, but it's not that special. It is a reflection on what's going on in the world. If the neckline can't get any lower, or the jeans end almost underneath the butt, fashion tends to go another way radically, such as a turtleneck and a veil around your head. High rise jeans... a logical consequence of the search for innovation. After shoes with pointy noses come shoes with round noses! After the tall plateau pump comes the flat Roman sandal.'



Vlisco Hommage 2013 © Koen Hauser

You got a great chance in 2005 with 'Everything Dali' to show your talents in a large exhibition (in Museum Boijmans van Beuningen). Can you tell us more about how you handled such a massive subject like Dali?

'I was in the museum often to imagine the space. Dalí painted a lot of sunsets, in which the sky gradually changed its colour. That was my point of departure.

'It was the first time that the museum worked with a printed gradient on the wall. That was really beautiful! The works seemed to float on the walls.'



Everything Dali 2005 © Bob Goedewaagen

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'mode ♥ kunst'

'I have a lot of respect for people who dare to dress differently. It is not easy. People think that you do it on purpose to invite comments, while that isn't the reason you do it. I have experienced that first hand.'

You said your role as a curator is comparable to an actor. Do you mean that as an actor who plays a role for a film, you play a role for an exhibition?

'To me it's very important to dig deep into whatever the subject is. That digging is something I really enjoy!

'I will go very far in that regard. Certainly with the intense build-up, if you know it will be over again shortly. By then, the subject is almost toxic to me.

'I will start working on the next thing immediately the Monday after, the best way to leave it all behind. I rarely come back during a running exhibition. But three months are over in a jiffy and other projects have to wait until it's finished.'



All kinds of Angels, Catherijne Convent, 2008

Sjarel Ex once said about you that you make something visible that we don't see. Do you agree? What do you think is the essence of being a good curator?

'Everything is about nuance. I would never like to dominate the artworks, nor do any designs that are too loud or too thought-out. To me, the theme is leading. My work has a lot of subtlety to it that you do not immediately see but that you can feel. I believe in layers, zooming in and out around the artwork.'

'To create 3D from 2D and vice versa, that's an example of such a layer. Take the position of the Jacob's ladder next to a real staircase, like in 'All kinds of Angels'. Or at 'Prints in Paris', with prints of paneling, stickers of wooden floors and a rug with a shadow. I put a lot of effort into them.'

'Another example is in 'Ode to Fashion', when you see a picture by Sabrina Bongiovanni, with exactly the same doll as in the picture in front of it, so there appears to be depth.'

'I work at my best if I can do what I think is good. Not when someone expects or wants something. Then I'll lose it.'



Prints of Paris 1900, with Tsur Reshef





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Voici Paris 2010 © J & M Zweerts, Sylvia Korving

Is each assignment a chance to pursue a kind of exploration? Is any new movie, book or piece of music a response to what came before it?

'Yes, you always respond to where you are now. It is always layer over layer, response to another response. Picasso also looked at African masks before painting. This process never stops, and that's what makes it so interesting.

'You can observe it with those successful international fashion exhibitions. First, you have Alexander McQueen and then you'll see all the influences on the other major international exhibitions. Like Dior, on display now in Paris. Every day long queues in front of the door.'

The question here is whether you as a curator also have to be a kind of an artist to do your job well. What's your opinion about that?

'I can only speak for myself but I would like to experience the subject (temporarily). For example, when I was busy with the romantic fashion show about the 1900s, I noticed that only paintings from that time period 'speak' to me. At that moment I had more difficulties with 20th Century paintings.

'Everything I can learn about this assignment about the nineteenth century enriches me. It's nice when it happens so playfully!'



Meanwhile, the Dutch museums know where to find you for their exhibitions. What would be your advice to a beginning curator? Are there any sides to curatorship that you don't think of as a starting curator?

'You should like to interact with different people, not just want to do your thing.'

'You should want to gain experience and give it time. Don't be too impatient or try to become too big too soon.'

You work a lot with Tsur Reshef. I'm curious about what a design partner has what you do not have.

'Tsur has incredible spatial insight and knows like no other how ideas can be transformed into an image on the computer, so that everyone can see the final product. Tsur does the technical implementation of plans I've been brooding on for a while. I do not really work on the computer, but if Tsur does it, the plan is suddenly visible. We differ greatly in that.'



Voici Paris 2010 © J & M Zweerts, Sylvia Korving. Een couture jurk van Jean-Paul Gaultier, naast een werk van Jody Carey

If someone offered you an unlimited budget for an exhibition, what would you like to try?

'Making installations with nature-related subjects. I love the beauty and perfection of nature and that nothing is as straight as an arrow.

'The quality of an exhibition depends on many factors, especially how free you are, and what the requirements of the employers are. But expressing your enthusiasm for what you do always helps.'



Werkkamer van Maarten Spruyt © Hotze Eisma



Masterly in Milano, 2016, together with Tsur Reshef
Poster Romantische Mode © Koen Hauser

Links

[Website Maarten Spruyt](#)
[Maarten Spruyt en Gemeentemuseum](#)
[Romantische mode video op Arttube](#)
[Website Koen Hauser](#)
[Prints in Paris 1900 in Van Gogh Museum](#)
[Interview in de Volkskrant](#)

JEGENS & TEVENS

Stroom Invest Interviews / Curator #9 Azar Mahmoudian

door Nathalie van der Lely

10 september 2017

Azar Mahmoudian is a curator and educator based in Tehran. Recently she was part of the curatorial team of the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016). She co-ran kaf, an independent space focusing on discursive programs on art and theory in Tehran (2010-2015) and been a lecturer at Tehran Art Universities. Her research develops from her ongoing engagement with exhibiting formats and modes of political imaginary which emerges within display structures.



Can you tell us something about your recent activities?

I was mainly involved with writing and preparing the ground for a series of events in Tehran which will happen at a couple of artist's studios. And then there is another project: I'm working on, which is about the aging of contemporary art objects, and their habitats. It will be a performative expedition happening in Tehran museum of contemporary art, and stories around the peculiar life of a few of the artworks that survived the post revolution removal of the collection from the museum's walls. These artworks remained on view, while the rest end up in basement storage of the museum – the mausoleum.

On the side of writing, the most recent thing was a co-written text on works of Marie Louise Ekman, amazing artist and woman, published in the book of her retrospective exhibition at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, this summer.

How did you become a curator?

I hadn't planned to become one. A series of engagements ended me up to that path. My interest in art theory- specially the representational discourse, the ways in which thoughts are distributed, circulated, and shared, experiments with formats of discussion and collective decision making, and alternative ways of education, or mediating in general. I followed these in parallel paths and at some point curatorial practice became a perfect junction.

But more specifically, my first curatorial experience started with an archival research and exhibition about a certain mode of exhibition making that predominated the Iranian art scene in 2000s; Group survey shows of works by Iranian artists held in Europe and north America, representing, and at the same time defining, "Iranian contemporary art", through this representations. There was a boom, where more than 100 of such survey shows held between 2000-2010, nearly all of them curated by foreign curators, and the rest, mainly by diaspora Iranians.

These shows drastically transformed the production, material condition and even ethics of the local scene in a very short time. They were symptomatic of the socio-political changes of the time, but in lack of other exhibiting platforms and critical discourse, also acted as an unbelievably dominant force, affecting the scene.

That was when I was delved into the power dynamism around displaying structures and mediation of art. In fact, I was situated in a double edge setting, because the subject of research was being presented in form of an exhibition, and in Europe too. It was complicated what kind of narrative, displaying the archive would produce.

How was your experience as a curatorial member of the 11th Gwangju Biennale in 2016 in the Republic of Korea?

To put it very brief, the curatorial team all came from small scale art institutions and independent spaces, and we somehow tried to use the large scale structure of biennial -in terms of resource and visibility- to apply strategies of small scale art organisations, and bring forth the importance of their existence and approach in mediation, experimentation and providing a support structure for the artists.

We managed to give an artist fee to the participating artists for the first time in the history of the biennial. On the other hand we focused on what does it mean to embed the biennial locally. We used already existed art infrastructures in the city, and tried to make a meaningful relation between them, the local residents and the biennial. For example we collaborated with universities and artist run project spaces in Gwangju and Seoul to organise monthly programs of lectures, group crits, screenings, reading groups, artist talks, curated walks in the city, and communal dinning with the generous collaboration of commissioned artists who were traveling to Korea for the research trips throughout the year. We also organized gatherings with different communities in the biennial neighborhood, months before the exhibition time, to talk about the biennial.

In terms of curatorial method, we posed few questions at the beginning, and then by inviting around 30 artists to visit Gwangju, having conversation with us, and making new commissions, developed the conceptual framework of biennial with them. It was incredibly intense and a valuable experience.



Metahaven - Crying Mother (Information Skies), Mural. Gwangju Biennale 2016

Can you tell us something about the Iranian art scene?

I grew up in an artist family and somehow witnessed different shifts of the post-revolution art scene, specially the visual arts; having a clear memory of the ways my mom's artist friends survived the bleakest years of 80s by supporting each other, collective painting in nature, self-educating, and putting up shows in their homes, while having 3 non-art related jobs to live.

For a certain period around late 90s the state tried a top-down investments in the "cultural section" and an open border policy, which was well functioned as a valve, by incorporating the dissenting intellectuals inside the country, and restoring relationship of the IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran) to the outside, in order to navigate the economic isolation. This was the 2000s, with all the geopolitical shifts in the region. Some artists maneuvered within this relative openness very smartly, yet in absence of local independent institutions, the mentioned survey shows backed up by government, commercial galleries, and gulf auctions, turned into monopolizing channels for visibility and recognition for artists. This pushed artists into competitive individualism, fragmented the scene and even broke the integrity of artists' practice. At the same time, artists were not receiving enough feedback, if any at all, about their work, as they were always presented in a bundle and reviews were directed towards holistic introductions to the condition of life and culture in the IRI, instead of the artworks. Now we are experiencing a newer wave of privatization of public cultural institutions, while their content production is still systematically controlled.



The Fold: Absence, Disappearance and Loss of Memory in the work of 12 Iranian artists, 2013. Curated by Michel Dewilde and Azar Mahmoudian. Artists: Shohreh Feizdjou and Monir Farmanfarmayan

Which Iranian artist/art would you recommend?

The person behind the work is important for me. Apart from the artists that I like their works and their way of working, it has happened that I recommended artists whose work is not perfectly strong, but have developed a practice and need more support. Also in case of Iranian artists, I even promote some of them; specially the ones, that are not googleable, the material around their work is mainly non-English, or they don't speak English or don't have financial backup to study or go abroad. Iranian art scene is still very isolated comparing to the region. If these artists were in Beirut or even Ramallah with the same condition, they would have had much more of the visibility they deserve, I believe.

What is your biggest professional achievement until now?

Working with some of the artists that I like. I'm usually very careful about talking of hardships of working in Iran, as its often interpreted in unwanted ways. But it was a truly difficult path to be able to work with the international artists, while living in Tehran. For few years all the opportunities available to me, was making a show with Iranian artists in international venues. I did it once and decided that would be the last. Because no matter what you do, and how you try to mediate the show, at the end it's received in a setup explained above.

While I'm very committed to the local scene, I didn't want to function in that scope, and only as a tour guide to the local scene. I got engaged in other ways, like teaching at Tehran art university and co organising an independent art space in Tehran. And tried to find possibilities of working with the artists that I like their practice- either Iranian or international- which despite my will, was so far mainly possible outside the country. It's a precarious situation overall. Even now that I was able to work internationally at a certain professional level, my accessibility to the events, artists, lectures and discussions, exhibitions, etc. is still very restricted. You might say there is internet. It is not the same. As a curator you need to be in the space and meet people in flesh. So then, I am expected to function in that professional level and rhythm, with a precarious nutrition.

I know what I don't want to achieve though. I don't think I would like to run a big institution. That rhythm of production doesn't work for me. I prefer to work in small scale.



Reading Group. Gwangju Biennale 2016. Title: The Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?)



Celine Condorelli's "On the Right and on the Left (Without Glasses)" is on display at the 2016 Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale

What do you consider as your greatest drive?

I think anger is definitely the most clear and forceful drive I could trace. That keeps me work in Tehran. The city is like a big "what if" as a friend put it. There is a huge urgency and potential to make or revive structures, alignments, practices, understandings, for which you need much focus to choose your fight. But then, there have been all these perpetual failures and aggressions when all the little steps in realizing the potentials have been blew in the air overnight.

The passion is to encounter great people, and think and together and work with them. They could be dead or alive. That is the best part of curating.

As a curator: What is your biggest merit? And what is your biggest flaw?

I think maybe same things in me turn up into both good and bad ends. Mainly being perfectionist, and getting emotionally involved with the work. These are the aspects which bring a kind of intensity, or a sharp edge in working process. For example perfectionism has saved me wherever I refrained from tentative job opportunities which had something wrong with them, or the people offering it. Some friends considered that as unnecessary pickiness, but keeping up that criteria was fruitful, because in the long run I ended up with better opportunities where I encountered people with shared criteria and work ethics that supported me. But at the same time perfectionism is my biggest hassle as well, it could lead to perpetual dissatisfaction, self exploitation or being a control freak, specially when I want to make the most of things within a limited resource and time.

Same mechanism with the emotional engagement. Or maybe once I find a better term for it. For me working out the relationships in a project is as important as working with ideas and artworks. Curating is also about "being with" the artists, and modes of negotiating with institutions and power structures. It's a collaboration or in best case, a collective process, where the creative aspect is not necessarily in the concept, but also in the methods of working together.

The fact is, as much as you get "professionalized", there is less time to spend on relationships. I try to slow down enough for that, and consider that as a merit.

On the other hand nothing could devastate me more than bad behavior and aggression in the working process. I might loose my whole motivation when exposed to that. I have been receiving this advice repeatedly from

colleagues, that I should not get emotionally involved with the job. But I can't. Maybe because deep down, I don't believe in it enough.

Many of us work a lot. And finding concentration becomes vital. Not to get emotionally involved with complications and misbehaviors at work, means to keep up on an "energy saving mode". But what is this over productivity for, if we self harm and cannot behave well with 5 people working with us? I know it sounds like a cliché slogan, but seriously. The whole thing would feel so pretentious and contradictory.

What's still on your curators' bucket list?

I don't shop or pick. I think it's important which vocabularies we use... curating is a mutual collaboration. In terms of future plans, what I like to do at the moment is to make shows in Tehran. Something which has not been possible so far.

Links

[11th Gwangju Biennale 2016 The Eighth Climate \(What does art do?\)](#)