

The job of the curator is at the peak of desirability. New university courses promise an academic entry into the field, and never have as many students applied for these courses. Over the past two decades “Über-curators” such as Hans Ulrich Obrist or Klaus Biesenbach have been arguably the art world’s most influential tastemakers.

ASPIRATION:

## WHEN I GROW UP I WANNA BE BIESENBACH

SIX ASPIRING CURATORS ON MAKING  
IT IN THE ART WORLD

INTERVIEW — Anneli Botz

The curator is seen as a person with real influence, able to determine artistic discourse and public opinion, usurping the art critic.

But what are the chief concerns guiding the young contemporary curator? What do they perceive as their role in the art world? To answer this question Sleek sat down with some of the art scene’s emerging talents to discuss their role as a cultural leader in both independent and institutional spaces.

**BEN VICKERS**  
Ben Vickers (28) is both a curator for the Serpentine Galleries and an initiator of independent projects. His distinct political views on the art world encourage the role of the curator as a caretaker for artists and a risk-taker that makes use of his position as a cultural influencer in a global debate.

**Do you see yourself as a curator?** Well, it is my job title at the Serpentine Galleries. Despite this, it’s not something that I can easily identify with, given the field. In the last decade it seems to have become a fairly empty, generalised, term that applies to anything from



Ben Vickers

choosing your holiday destination to organising your Pinterest. I don’t think there’s much hope for wrestling back its intended meaning. It is, though, an interesting chameleon-like identity to embody.

**How would you describe the difference between working in an institutional context and for more independent projects?**

The audience is different, and therefore the strategy differs.

I’ve been in Italy for the past six months facilitating the “unMonastery” prototype, working with an international network of peers. It has a very specific audience, interested in utopian ideas. But when working in the context of a gallery, especially when there’s a general public involved, you are responsible for translating ideas to be comfortably received. I think in this respect my role at the Serpentine allows me to create a gateway into an alternative state of consciousness that wouldn’t otherwise be accessible to a general audience.

**So you have institutions on the one hand and autonomous networks on the other. How do you feel about those two models?**

The institutions aren’t running things anymore, but they have a role to play, and by that I don’t just mean the art institutions. There are different ways in defining strength right now. Within an international, autonomous network you have access to other resources that institutions don’t. This is because effective networks are built on participation and collaboration, without spectators. Whereas institutions struggle to mobilise a critical mass in the same way —

as they attempt to direct the flow of the network, instead of participating. It’s an interesting time to be involved with both simultaneously.

**What is missing in the art world?** I guess a common understanding of what’s at stake in the present moment and a greater sense of scale. The art world is very inward-looking, particularly when it tries to discuss or enact politics. Art is too concerned with value politics and

has in many ways pretty much lost all its power.

**Where do you see that original aspiration in art?**

Symbolically but also socially, art has always had the potential to challenge structures, like governments and social norms.

**What do you expect from a curator?**

Culture is an exceptionally useful and slippery category to shield people in giving them a reputation. As a curator I believe you have a responsibility to those who are trying to push an agenda and who would otherwise be silenced. So I think a curator should be considering those people that are putting their necks on a line and think about how they could help them.

**NADIM JULIEN SAMMAN AND ANJA HENCKEL**

Nadim Samman (31), known for his curatorial work for the 4th Marrakech Biennale, and Anja Henckel (31) met in London, where they were both working as independent curators. In 2012 the pair moved to Berlin to start the non-profit organisation Import Projects which has become a successful art platform and the representation of their sheer desire for art, life and happiness.

**What is the difference between working as an independent curator in London and Berlin?**

NS: Berlin feels like the last free city in the Western world, where people come to create rather than to fit into boxes that were created for them. The economic and social conditions are a lot more viable here, for both curators and artists.

**You are running a non-profit space. What is the biggest difference between doing this and working for an institution?**

NS: We are interested in what artists are thinking, how they are working, the issues and approaches that motivate them. Yes, we would like bigger exhibition budgets, and perhaps a little more structure. But we are

## ZOE BUTT

After working as curator for renowned institutions worldwide, in a decision which some would consider career ending, Australian / Chinese Zoe Butt (37) moved to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Here she became the pioneering director and curator of San Art, the country's largest art centre.

### How would you describe your career over the last few years?

My background of curatorial work is quite broad; from international institutions to private and public independent spaces. Moving to a Communist context was a

### the job of a curator something to aspire to?

NS: People see curating as a creative and intellectual path. But a curating degree isn't the only route. It is probably better to study art history, philosophy, or even architecture. You can always learn 'technical' skills elsewhere. Being involved with art is one of the greatest adventures you can have, if it is pursued with the right spirit. Done the right way, it is like getting away with murder. Art is about inventing the world you want to live in. There is a notion of conspiracy to it that I also find very appealing. Let's be real: I am involved with art because I don't really like work. I like art.



Zoe Butt



Nadim Julien Samman and Anja Henckel. Photo: Raimar von Wienskowski

not interested in compromising creative freedom or spontaneity.

AH: If the reason for the exhibition is not totally in the artist's control then compromises occur. We don't have any responsibilities to external parties except the artist.

### In the eyes of the artists, what makes you good curators?

AH: It is the exchange and the friendship, the effort and energy one shows – from conception to execution.

NS: We offer artists an opportunity to exhibit in an open context. We might not be able to offer them the financial resources of a larger institution, but we pay attention to technical and intellectual detail.

### Surely artists also benefit from your networking skills?

NS: Artists care about curators who make exhibitions and events that interest them, and which draw together networks that they might like to tap into. A large part of what we do is building a community.

AH: Our collaborators often find each other through Import Projects, an organic support network generated by the space.

In recent years universities have picked up on people's desire to work in the art world. What makes

deliberate decision. After more than a decade sitting in front of a computer in a museum, creating exhibitions and buying artwork for collections, I began to feel completely disconnected from the realm of production of the artist.

### Do you feel like you re-established that connection?

Absolutely. I am with the artists from the production until the exhibition and beyond. Although the financial landscape here is really difficult, I feel like I am learning a lot. Fundamentally it is the willpower and passion of the artists that would make me feel stupid about walking away. When I left my last job in Beijing in 2009, my boss asked me, "What on earth are you doing? You are committing career suicide." But on the contrary this decision really shaped my career. Since I moved to Vietnam I've had so many invitations to participate in international platforms. I think it is this reversed exoticism coming into play; when people want to know something from a region that they know nothing about.

### Does the concept of a curator in Vietnam differ to the concept in, say, Europe?

In Vietnam there is no clear understanding of what a curator is and we do not have an infrastructure for art, so the landscape for my kind of work is not easy. Also we suffer quite a lot of political restrictions. The West likes to see this as a way of censorship and it is a popular way of writing about it. However, personally I see the restrictions more about a government struggling with the role of culture in their society in general.

### Looking at the art world from a European context, do you feel like there is stagnation when it comes to an international discourse?

I would agree with you that within Europe there seems to be a lack of a discourse. My last visit to Berlin was actually very surprising. I was really shocked at the understanding of category, of what constitutes contemporary – I felt like I was walking into the Nineties in many cases.

Why do you think that is?

The market does not have the time or the patience to try and understand. When I was in Berlin, far too many people said to me: "Zoe, no one will understand what you are trying to present." It was really alarming that the leaders of the cultural community were not willing to put the effort or the willpower into educating their communities, into blurring the lines between ethnography and art for example.

## CHÉ ZARA BLOMFIELD

Ché Zara Blomfield (26) jokingly calls herself a 'post-curator', thereby declaring a new era of curating.

She lived in London for over six years and moved to Berlin in 2013 to open "The Showroom", which serves as an extension of her ongoing curatorial project "The Composing Rooms".

### You don't document your shows, why is that?

The works have usually been documented already; I don't feel like I need to make new images. The other reason is: if I don't document the space, then maybe people will come to see it in person. Also, the works in the space change all the time and there is no show schedule, so there would be no single way of documenting it.

### Don't you want a record of your curatorial work?

I enjoy what I am doing at the time, and I have a slightly weird relationship

with producing new material because there is enough already. Why read a review of an exhibition when you can read a really good essay from the Sixties? I feel like a lot of art production happens because of a market drive and because artists feel like they have to make something new.

### Your space is a non-profit space. How do you finance it?

Well you could see it as a very expensive hobby. Luckily I have other work in the industry. I am also not against selling art, and sometimes I succeed in that. Essentially the space is very selfish, I want to learn about the work I show, learn through the work, the artists and the engagements that happen.



Ché Zara Blomfield

### What kind of art attracts you personally?

At the moment, I am drawn to work that has something tactile about it. I am a big fan of the pieces by Keith Allyn Spencer. He finds all the materials; used clothes, wooden panels,

leftover paint tubes. Some compositions are made of several pieces and can be rearranged by the installer, they are playful and engaging, and you can get a sense of the energy that has gone into them.

What happened to being an outsider? Where is the experimenting, the fucking things up? Is art still fun?

Fortunately art always has the chance to be self-aware and turn trends on their head.

fellow curator Gregor Quack for the artist-run space Old Room in Chelsea. It was important to us to collaborate with a non-profit space that distances itself from economic interests and where we do not have to compromise when it comes to concept and choice of artists. One of our main approaches is the deliberate choice of space and we try to reflect these considerations in our artistic concepts as well.

**Which artist has recently caught your eye?**

At the moment we are big fans of Debo Eilers' pieces. He merges installations, sculptural pieces and performative processes while experimenting with his own rules and structures as well as with the deliberate deconstruction of these. In his compositions and collaborations he blurs the lines between positions and therefore authorship – this really fascinated us.

**Where do you see the differences between the art scenes in New York and Berlin?**

The main differences we see here in New York are probably the omnipresence of the market and the living conditions for artists. Artists are not under the same kind of pressure when it comes to time, financial matters and rivalry in Berlin. Also the distinction between commercially oriented spaces, galleries and non-profit projects does not seem to be such a big topic in New York, which is why projects like ours are only possible on a short-term basis.

**Do you feel like everything is 'curatable' nowadays?**

The term itself does indeed suffer from an inflationary usage. On the one hand it implies a high level of cultural production per se, and on the other hand it is associated with the idealised image of the star curator as the new power figure who distances himself from the institutionalised realm and acts independently. To us this means a difficult relation between the profession itself and people who are organising and putting together things on a more general level. This can certainly lead to the degradation of the work of experienced people who are actually professional curators.

## ELISA R. LINN AND LENNART WOLFF

Elisa R. Linn (24) and Lennart Wolff (23) have been working hand in hand for many years. After establishing the well-received art project space km temporaer in Berlin, the

young power couple has temporarily migrated to New York. As advocates of a discursive and interactive approach to art they foster a mixture of traditional theories, debates and strong contemporary positions and see themselves more as initiators than as authoritative curators.

**Lennart, Elisa, how would you describe your curatorial practice?**

Instead of dictating a certain way of exhibition-making we aim for flat hierarchies to create a productive discourse between curators, artists and other collaborators. Group exhibitions are a good format for us to create less of a product but more of a versatile process and unusual connections that have the potential to open up new points of views.

**Which project are you currently working on?**

Right now we are based in New York and are working together with



Elisa R. Linn and Lennart Wolff

**Would you say that many artists lose their focus on the reasons behind their art-making?**

An artist/professor I know said that in his class his students are already thinking of themselves as brands. I think this is scary and very limiting. What about destroying your brand? How about if you want to change your identity?

**How do you feel about working with artists in Berlin?**

Some engagements have been fantastic, but I have tried to arrange studio visits and they just don't happen. I wonder if this is a Berlin syndrome. I think maybe some artists aren't even interested in exhibiting so much anymore, because their work risks being over-exposed by constantly circulating online.

**Do you think it is connected to a certain kind of fear?**

Perhaps it relates to an over-professionalisation of the art world.

## JOHAN HOLTEN

Johan Holten (37) is always on the move. The energetic Danish curator has already brought new life into numerous traditional art institutions and is currently director of Kunsthalle Baden-Baden. Here he has successfully redefined the role of the public art institution by questioning long-established mechanisms and combining them with an international scope of contemporary artistic viewpoints.

**What is your exhibition concept in Baden-Baden?**



Johan Holten. Photo: Armin Linke

I focus on a concept that goes beyond the individual exhibition but functions in a bigger picture like a construction kit. I pay a lot of attention to the space and location itself and try to find ways that our new formats can function together with more traditional aspects of the city.

**How would you describe the institution that is Kunsthalle?**

The Kunsthalle Baden-Baden is a classic example of its kind because it does not have its own collection.

Therefore its role is to use art to analyse the immediate present and raise eligible questions to encourage thinking as well as to provide answers.

**How do you think the image of the curator has changed over the years?**

I think that after the big debates in the Nineties 'the curator' is quite an established term. This also leads to negative effects – almost everyone who has written an exhibition text can call himself a curator these days. I am curious to see if the new university programmes will change something in the curatorial landscape. Sometimes I feel that there is a trend to an over-interpretation

of exhibition making, especially when looking at shows conducted by graduates. To distance themselves from others, they develop more and more complex concepts and in the end the visitor is left confused and the art is left behind.

**How important is travelling for you?**

It is incredibly important to me because the artists are located elsewhere and I need to see as much art, as many exhibitions as possible to find new sources of inspiration. And maybe this is also the advantage of

living more provincially, as you do not expect everything to be on your doorstep.

**Does the curator still function as a tastemaker?**

Not really. Actually, the curator is pretty much left out nowadays. When you look at some of the young artists that are currently made big in a matter of two years, you can see that the auction houses and the secondary market are the pushers behind this fairly new development. Today the market raises

its own kind of artist biographies, without the influence of institutions. It is interesting that most of these artists have never had a solo exhibition in a traditional institution, like a museum or Kunstverein. It is a lot more about economic interests than it is about the art itself, and I doubt this is always in favour of the artists. **How would you describe the feeling that keeps you on going?** At the end it is about the feeling of having created an exhibition and therefore something that was not possible before. You have put one and one together and hopefully you got three. If that happens it is a magical moment and you can feed on this happiness for quite some time.