

May 2015

ARTNEWS

SINCE 1902

THE 2015 VENICE BIENNALE:
OKWUI ENWEZOR'S LAYERED VISION

CÉLESTE BOURSIER-MOUGENOT'S
MOVING GARDEN

CT JASPER AND JOANNA MALINOWSKA:
POLAND/HAITI/VENICE

YOAN CAPOTE'S CUBA



MAY 2015



GARAGE ROCKED

91

Kate Fowle and the making of a Moscow museum

BY DAN DURAY



To understand Kate Fowle's job at Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, and how she does it, consider the case of Rashid Johnson, from whom Fowle commissioned a sculpture shortly after she became the museum's chief curator in 2013. The sculpture will stand in the atrium of the institution's new Rem Koolhaas-designed building when it opens in June.

Johnson, who knew Fowle from her tenure as head of Independent Curators International in New York, visited Moscow for the first time earlier this year to talk about his plans for the piece. He told her he was interested in exploring themes of black bolshevism, but wasn't sure where to begin his research.

Fowle, he said, "introduced me to someone who had watched all the footage of Kumba Yala and Patrice Lumumba," and of major postcolonial figures associated with the USSR. When he decided he might like to bring some plants into the piece, Fowle "found the best plant consultant in Moscow, and we spent an entire day

going through this historic greenhouse that's been there for 100 years, that houses the most incredible exotic plants, including all the local succulents."

"There's no subject that's too distant for her," Johnson said. "If you bring up something and say, 'this is something I'm interested in, or thinking about,' it's like, 'I know five scholars, five film archivists, five plant people.'"

There are various kinds of curators in the contemporary art world. There are ideas curators, who like to build exhibitions around themes. There are political curators, who are out to change the world. Fowle, as Johnson put it, is "an artist's curator. She's open to dialogue and really wants to participate in the vision, rather than try to mold that vision."

It's a designation the 43-year-old has earned from a number of artists over the course of her career. With Garage's June opening, however, and its transition from what some have called a vanity project to a full-fledged museum that draws on Russia's history, she is facing her toughest challenge yet.



LIKE MANY ART WORKERS—CURATORS, GALLERY OWNERS, critics—who are credited with a special understanding of artists' processes, Fowle, who was born in Kent, in southeast England, started out as an artist herself, receiving a degree in painting from Norwich University of the Arts in 1993.

Her time at art school coincided with the rise of globe-trotting unaffiliated curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, a period when the job description of a curator was in transition, and one could choose not to do it within the confines of an institution. "There were new systems in place, like the biennials or lottery funding in the UK, that enabled people to curate on a project-to-project basis," she said. "Curating became untethered from the institution."

It also became more expressive, more akin to creating art. In 1995, as a curator at the Towner Art Gallery and Museum in Eastbourne, East Sussex, Fowle secured a lottery-enabled Arts Council grant to curate "Quarrying." In addition to works from the Towner's

art and social-history collections, the exhibition showcased bags of mud that had been collected alongside archaeological discoveries for sample purposes. The discoveries themselves could not be displayed because they had not yet been properly identified. "You could say it showed my interest in institutions," Fowle said.

Fowle took to curating. She wanted to keep painting, but soon found that the time she spent in her studio was better spent in the studios of other artists. "You need to get inside the work or the minds of the artists you're working with," she said. "So for me it was very difficult to see how I could continue [with my own art]."

In 1996, she and a colleague, Deborah Smith, founded

PREVIOUS SPREAD Kate Fowle photographed in New York City on March 31, 2015. ABOVE An architect's rendering of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's new Rem Koolhaas-designed building, which is slated to open in June. The building is an update to an existing Soviet-era restaurant in Moscow's Gorky Park.

smith + fowle, a London-based curatorial venture. It was a shoestring operation: the two women worked out of a small office in the East End—"We always joked that if we failed we'd become private detectives," Fowle said—and collaborated with local councils, nonprofits, museums, and university research centers around England.

Among their largest projects was a series of commissions leading up to the opening of the New Art Gallery Walsall in 2000. One of those commissions was Fiona Banner's first public artwork, a 30-foot neon sign that read, "Be there Saturday Sweetheart," and was placed atop the tallest building in the Walsall city center. Fowle has characterized smith + fowle's spirit as "try anything once."

BUT THE NEW WORLD OF INDEPENDENT, GRANT-ENABLED curating meant Fowle didn't have to stay in England, and she soon headed across the pond. In 2001 she cofounded the Master's Program in Curatorial Practice at San Francisco's California College of the Arts and served for six years as the program's chair.

At the time, there were few degree programs in contemporary curating, besides the ones at Bard College and Columbia University. Fowle's was the first on the West Coast, and it earned her distinction in the art world. It wasn't long before a new job offer lured her elsewhere, this time to China, where she became international curator at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, a Beijing private museum newly opened by Belgian collectors Guy and Myriam Ullens.

In many ways, working at UCCA foreshadowed Fowle's role at Garage. She spent much of her time traveling, and she sometimes butted heads with censors. One of her first shows featured artists like Matt Bryans, Amy Granat, and Sterling Ruby; she gave it the title "Stray Alchemists" but had to change it because the Chinese government didn't approve publicity for the notion of straying from a set path. (The new title, roughly translated into English, was "rolling stone melting gold.")

Fowle enjoyed the challenge, though. At the CCA in San Francisco, she'd started to think about curating from a teaching perspective; at UCCA she could put some of those thoughts into practice. And she liked being in China, where she could conceive of curating "outside the Western constructs."

In 2009 she returned to the United States to become executive director of the New York-based Independent

Curators International, a small nonprofit that organizes modestly sized exhibitions that travel to U.S. institutions. In some ways, ICI harked back to her days at smith + fowle. When Nina Sundell and Susan Sollins founded ICI in 1975, their motivations were similar to those of Fowle and Smith, which Fowle characterized in an interview shortly after she took the ICI job as an "impetus to fill a need we saw in the art world." In Sundell and Sollins's case, they realized it was difficult for quality artworks to be seen outside the main centers, like New York and Los Angeles; Smith and Fowle were addressing the same problem in England in the early '90s, when there wasn't a lot of market support for artists.

When Fowle arrived at ICI, it, like much of the art world in 2009, was in financial straits. To revitalize it, she began staging regular "curatorial intensives," weeklong mentoring and networking fests designed to foster young talent. At the same time, she was applying knowledge gained at smith + fowle to the challenges of traveling exhibitions. The first show at smith + fowle, titled "You don't know me but..." toured to three different venues, with the works changing according to the specifics of each location.

At ICI, Fowle tried a similar approach, evolving the organization's concept of "exhibitions in a box" to be more nimble and customizable. In 2013, ICI's retrospective of the artist Martha Wilson, which started in 2009 at Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax, "went to Los Angeles and in Los Angeles Martha Wilson dressed up as Barbara Bush," said Wilson, who often refers to her identity-shifting artistic persona in the third person. Documentation of that performance was seen at the next venue, in Milwaukee, where the show also included a bookstore-based celebration of Wilson's New York avant-garde library, the Franklin Furnace Archive.

Through projects like these, Fowle further developed her reputation as the kind of person for whom the art is paramount. And while she had traveled the world in the style of an independent curator, she wasn't flitting from biennial gig to biennial gig. The artist Robert Longo said his harshest critics—and the ones he probably trusts the most—are his wife and Fowle. "She's very modest and very—she's not out there," he said of Fowle. "A lot of curators are getting their face

OPPOSITE Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's administrative offices, housing part of its archives.



everywhere. She's as important if not more important than most of them."

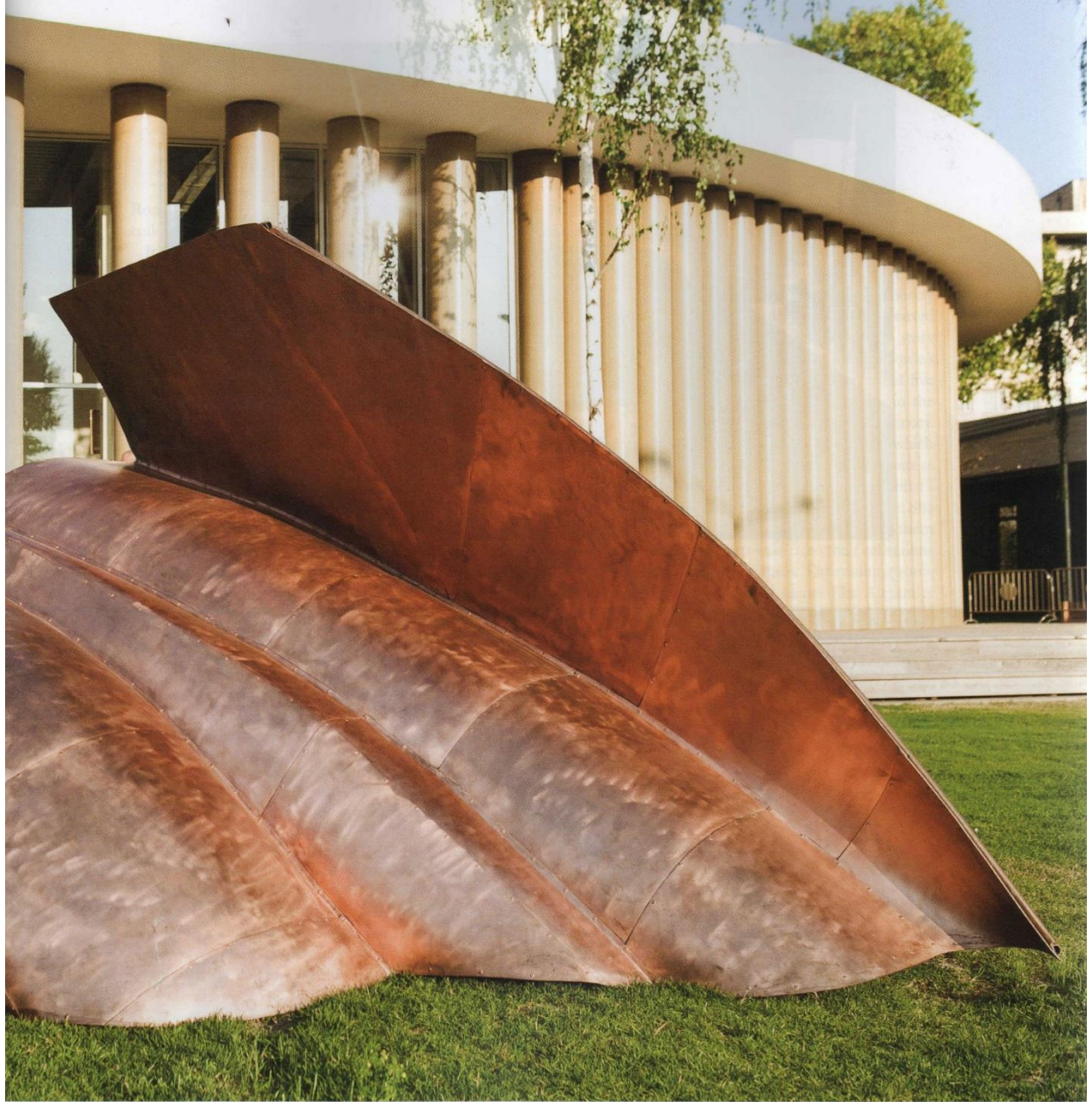
"I'm the artist, I'm creating the stuff," Wilson said, "but I'm concerned with my internal sense of audience, not with a wider world of audience." Fowle, on the other hand, Wilson continued, "was thinking about the immediate audience, the long-term audience in terms of art history, and the social-political-economic audience, the ramifications of this kind of work in a larger social sense."

96 THINKING ABOUT ART IN A LARGER SOCIAL SENSE IS WHAT Fowle has been doing at Garage; part and parcel of that has been rethinking the museum itself. "She's done this now at a couple of places," Longo said of Fowle's first two years there. "She takes these institutions and she fucking grabs them by the horns and points them in the right direction."

Garage began in 2008 as the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture. Originally housed in a former bus depot in a working class neighborhood in north Moscow, the center was founded by the then-27-year-old Russian philanthropist Dasha Zhukova, an oligarch's daughter who was raised in Los Angeles and lives mainly in London with her billionaire husband,

OPPOSITE In the foreground, an installation of elements from Danish artist Danh Vo's *We The People* (2010-14) outside Garage Museum of Contemporary Art as part of "The New International," an exhibition curated by Kate Fowle in 2014. A 1:1 scale replica of the Statue of Liberty fabricated in China, *We The People* consists of about 250 individual parts, only some of which are shown at any one time. In the background, a temporary pavilion in Gorky Park, specifically designed for Garage by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Shigeru Ban, has housed the museum since 2014. The oval structure, which incorporates 20-foot-high columns made from cardboard tubes, will be demolished after Garage moves to its new, permanent home in June.





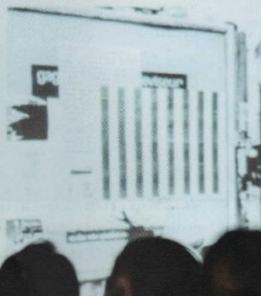


Харальд Зеeman (1933-2005)

Для Зеemана создание выставок было непрерывным процессом, отличной от программных функций музея. Он был «кочующим», странствующим или, другими словами, не куратором.

- 1969 «Когда отношения становятся формой» / *When Attitudes Become Form*, Кунстхалле Берна
- 1969 Создание «Агенства духовного гастарбайтерства» / *Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit (The Agency for Intellectual Guestwork)*
- 1972 «Документа 5»

«Человек, который делает выставки» / *Ausstellungsorganisator (Exhibitionmaker)* = «администратор, любитель вступительных текстов, библиотекарь, менеджер, мультипликатор, хранитель, финансист и дипломат»



Roman Abramovich, and their museum-quality art collection.

It wasn't a museum in the traditional sense, more a kunsthalle-type landing spot for whatever was tickling the international art world's fancy at the moment. Exhibitions included Christian Marclay's film *The Clock* (2010), Marina Abramovic's staring-contest performance *The Artist is Present* (2010), and works from the collection of François Pinault.

Fowle's hiring, and the name change to Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in 2014, can be seen as recognition that the institution had to evolve. "Sadly at this point Garage has outgrown me," Zhukova said in a voicemail. "Garage is now at a stage when we want to transition from what we have been over the past eight years into a truly modern art institution and I thought Kate—with all her work at the ICI and her understanding of the art world and her being a very global person—would be the right candidate to do that." Fowle now splits her time between Moscow and New York, retaining a role with ICI as its director-at-large.

Garage's transformation into a museum is outwardly symbolized by Koolhaas's new building, an update to an existing structure in Gorky Park that served as a restaurant for the masses when it was built in 1968. In a recent interview in *WSJ. Magazine*, Koolhaas said he wants to preserve that building's Soviet eccentricities. "The building is basically a found object," Koolhaas said in the interview. "We are embracing it as it is."

Like Koolhaas, Fowle is embracing Garage's roots, seeking to make it as much a local institution as it is a global one. Just as Koolhaas's building refers to the original structure, Fowle's curating relies for its local context on a vast archive of primary source materials relating to contemporary art in Russia since the 1950s.

Assembled by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the archive is now run by Sasha Obukhova, formerly of the Soros Center and currently head researcher for Garage. For all intents and purposes, this archive, from which Garage drew some 15,000 items when it opened a free contemporary-art library in December, is Garage's equivalent of a permanent collection.

Fowle said she aimed to "shift the emphasis from the fact that [Garage] did a series of temporary exhibitions" to "our own base, with our own history, our own foundation. And that foundation is not a collection of objects, but a collection of stories, and evidence—at the heart of it—of the people who started contemporary Russian art."

THE GARAGE ARCHIVE CONTAINS DOCUMENTATION OF the Soviet unofficial art scene during the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Equally crucial to Garage's foundations is the decade that followed. "The '90s are important," Fowle said, "because it's basically the beginning of contemporary Russian art. That's when the underground artists started to go above ground. That's the beginning of the story we're now telling." It's a story that predates most of Fowle's young Moscow colleagues (like Garage's director of five years, 31-year-old Anton Belov), who were born in the 1980s and for whom the Soviet Union is barely a memory.

Her first exhibition at Garage, "Personal Choice," which ran from February to April 2014, showcased her talents as a politician and provided ballast to Hans Ulrich Obrist's view that she is as much a "producer" as she is a curator. She reached out to 22 of Russia's top collectors and asked them to select for the exhibition artworks from their collections that have personal meaning for them. The resulting show featured international household names like Alexander Calder and Jake and Dinos Chapman, but it also included Russians who are less known on the international scene, like experimental video artist Konstantin Khudyakov and the late performance artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, who often went simply by "Monroe," for his impersonations of Marilyn Monroe.

For Fowle, the exhibition had another level of socio-economic interest: the participation of the collectors, who in their own ways were affected by that ground zero for Russian art, the fall of the Iron Curtain. Few of them were even able to collect before that. "[There are many] conferences about what a museum is and what a collection is," Fowle said. But "there are different ways to open up" that conversation.

For the June opening, which will bring visitors from around the world, Fowle is drawing on the archive to create a sprawling chart showing the history of Soviet underground art. "Because there is no official history of contemporary Russian art and artists who are now part of Russia, rather than the Soviet Union, we are inviting different specialists to start one. We are trying to establish the family tree, if you like." ■

OPPOSITE TOP Russian philanthropist Dasha Zhukova, who founded the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in 2008. OPPOSITE BOTTOM Kate Fowle giving a lecture at the ICI Curatorial Intensive at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in 2014. Fowle divides her time between New York and Moscow.

Dan Duray is senior staff writer at ARTnews.