

# Interview with curator Valerie Smith

## by Jacqueline Falk and John Canciani

*While studying for her PhD in Art History in the early 1980s, Valerie Smith curated for Artists Space, one of the leading institutions for contemporary art in the New York City. She stayed there until 1989 and soon after became the director of the international exhibition Sonsbeek 93 in Arnhem, Netherlands. Following Sonsbeek 93, she was chief curator and exhibition director at Queens Museum of Art in New York for eight years. At this time she was honoured with important awards. Her exhibition Joan Jonas, Five Works, (2003) received the International Association of Critics Award and for Down the Garden Path, The Artists' Garden After Modernism, (2004), the Emily Hall Tremain Curatorial Award. Since April 2008 until the end of 2012 she was head of the department of Fine Arts, Film and Digital Media at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (HKW). With the series Labor Berlin she created since 2010 a much-noticed stage for international artists, who choose the city as a creative and experimental base for their work. Furthermore she is a writer, editor and publisher of numerous publications.*

*This interview was held by Skype with Jacqueline Falk and John Canciani on 18th January, 2013.*

**Jaqueline Falk/John Canciani:** Valerie, you were in your twenties when you curated for Artists Space in New York. Artists Space, founded in 1972, had a big impact on the art institutions in New York and later elsewhere. Did you realize how big your impact was and if yes, when was the moment of realisation?

**Valerie Smith:** I realized Artists Space had had an important history when Helene Weiner was the director, and I wanted to be a part of it, but I hadn't realized it would continue to be important for artists. I think you hope you make an impact, but you are not so conscious of it at the time. It was fun and about working with emerging artists. The criterion was to choose artists, who were not represented by a commercial gallery. This meant that one had to really go out into the field and look at a lot of young work. Some of it was quite tentative, meaning not fully formed because they were young and their work was in that nice experimental stage, which was exciting because it brought in a great spirit into the space.

In its early years Artists Space followed a format in which an artist picked another artist. Laurie Simmons, Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin and Elisabeth Murray, for example, all curated shows of other artists. We had group shows curated in this way and exhibitions, which followed themes that were important for that moment. Artists Space always had performances and regular talks, but they weren't so formalized and documented as they are today. We live in a more self-conscious time.

Irving Sandler, a founder of Artists Space initiated the "Artists Slide File" where emerging artists could bring their slides and a resume and any interested person could review that material and get in direct contact with them. Curators and critics came to look at work that came from all over New York City. The slide file provided another platform from which young artists could get shows outside of the Artists Space. In addition Artists Space curated an annual exhibition based on the work in the files and these exhibitions were always very exciting, because new talents popped up and a lot of curators, dealers and critics would come to the openings.

Towards the end of my tenure there I remember being very conscious of how to distinguish Artists Space from all other similar institutions, like White Columns or PS1, a line of thinking partially provoked by funding institutions. We were just trying to do edgy work, and although everybody could claim that for themselves, it became very clear that the art world was getting so big in NYC that it could definitely hold an Artists Space plus a White Columns, plus a PS1, plus any number of alternative spaces, it was just a matter finding your special angle.

The year I left we picked Nan Goldin to curate a show, *Witnesses Against our Vanishing*. What she did on the AIDS-issue became enormously controversial and our funding from the National Endowment was taken back because of what they deemed as explicit content. There were demonstrations; it became a huge issue. The positive outcome for the institution, because with these shows we all felt Artists Space had an effect on the political system.

**JF/JC:** After 8 years of curating at the Artists Space you were invited to be the director of *Sonsbeek 93*. You developed the concept of the 3 circles: the Sonsbeek park, the city and the surrounding flood lands of the city. This included 103 locations within the park, a constructed landscape, the city with its institutions and the surroundings of Arnhem. The places and the works were very heterogeneous with every work in its place. *Sonsbeek 93* had the reputation of being challenging. It seemed to us that the decision about the sites were very important and were made at an early stage. Did you visit Arnhem first, scouted the locations and defined them for yourself or was this done together with the artists?

**VS:** I had seen Saskia Bos' wonderfully romantic and timely project in 1986 and I knew a lot of the artists who she showed. I absolutely wanted to do something very different and the Stiftung Sonsbeek allowed me to do so. After my first experiences at Artists Space with producing site-specific works I knew that this way of working was what I wanted to do for *Sonsbeek 93*.

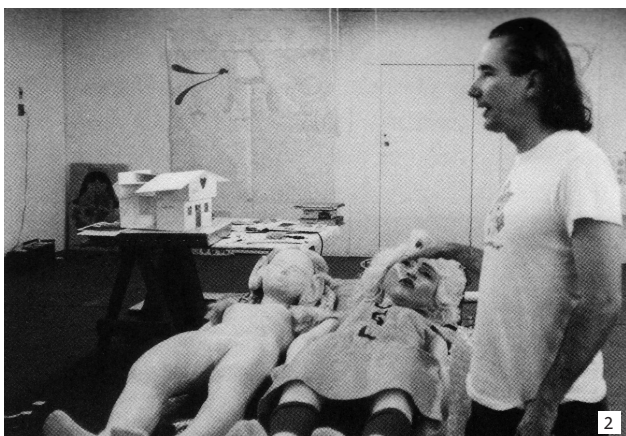
*Documenta 9* was also taking place at around that time, but unlike Documenta I didn't feel the necessity to travel around the world. There wasn't enough time or money to do so therefore, I kept very much to New York, LA and Europe. I had to work quickly and I wanted to show a number of artists that were working in Europe, but were not Europeans. I think I could've developed that much more, had I

had more time. The criterion was that once I decided on an artist I would invite them to propose an idea. I would invite them to come and spend two weeks in Arnhem. I had a car and we would travel in and around the environs of Arnhem, so I got to know the city very well. I wanted the exhibition to be in the villa, in Sonsbeek Park, in the city and out in the flood lands that surround the Rheine. Every time I got in the car, we would go to certain places that I knew, but I would always find new spots and the suggestions of the artists would lead us to explore different areas.

It was an adventurous and experimental way of working and a hugely time consuming process. There were a few people whose work I really liked, who I knew did not work in a site-specific or process oriented way, like Mike Kelley for instance and Juan Muñoz. I went to Madrid to meet Juan and told him that I didn't want him to do a sculpture, which was a relief to him, because he didn't want to either. He had been creating these wonderful radio pieces with his brother-in-law Alberto Iglesias, a great composer, who, I later found out, works with the film director Pedro Almodóvar. Juan with Roberto developed a beautiful story based on a building in Arnhem that was destroyed during World War II. The piece for radio, *Building for Music*, had a narrative by Juan about a visionary architect and his concept of architecture with a magical composition by Alberto.

Mike Kelley's *The Uncanny* project took place because I went to visit Mike in his studio in Pasadena. There, I saw the beginnings of the Heidi project he was working on with Paul McCarthy. Also on the wall were the beginnings of another project, but when I asked him about it, he said that it was a project that he would like to do but no one would do it, meaning finance it for him. I knew instantly that that was the project I had to produce. I knew it would be an exhibition within an exhibition within the *Sonsbeek 93* exhibition, because he included his personal collections plus an assembled collection of work within the larger context of the assembled artists in the *Sonsbeek 93* exhibition. But there were also projects proposed by artists that I refused to realize, like the project partially inspired by Neo-Nazi actions in the neighbouring town of Nijmegen, which Maurizio Cattelan wanted to do.

**JF/JC:** Do you remember, why it couldn't be realized?



**VS:** There was a very active Neo-Nazi group in Holland. They had spray-painted graffiti on the graves in the Allied Military Cemetery near Nijmegen. It was in the papers and Catalan wanted to use them in some way. It would have been terribly detrimental to the whole *Sonsbeek 93* project and to the community had we gone ahead with it. We discussed it among my colleagues and then I think I wrote him a letter to tell him I couldn't do it. I think he understood, but it was disappointing for all concerned that I couldn't accept any of his projects. And there were a number of other proposals that, for various reasons of finance, feasibility or mismatch, I did not realize.

**JF/JC:** You had 48 artists involved in *Sonsbeek 93*. How many artists did you contact or wanted to invite? Did any of the artists decline your invitation?

**VS:** I never had a limit on it, there came a point where... I think it's like a work of art, you know it's finished and then that's it. I invited more people than those who actually did a project. At one point it felt that it was full enough. And there is also a point where you've spent all the money.

There were artists who declined. Christian Philipp Müller was involved in the Unité project in

France. He considered *Sonsbeek 93* and was very nice, but in the end, suggested Tom Burr instead. Tom Burr is a wonderful American artist, who works site-specifically and I got to know his work and I liked it. Tom did an interesting project that involved Robert Smithson's writings on Frederick Law Olmstead and the gay community in Arnhem, which brought a strong social element to *Sonsbeek 93* that I sought to include and which Arnhem needed.

**JF/JC:** You decided that you wanted to make *Sonsbeek 93* like a research project, it seems you were interested in the approach, the curatorial methodology and the process. Did you have a reference point from other exhibitions you knew or was this a new experimental approach?

**VS:** Claire Bishop interviewed me regarding my models for *Sonsbeek 93*. She asked me specifically if I knew the work of Harald Szeemann, but I did not at the time I made *Sonsbeek 93*. I had never studied his exhibitions; coming from New York and steeped in the young art world there, he was absolutely not in my sphere of reference. I was most excited by the possibilities of the new productions I had done at *Artists Space* as I told you. Any possible outside influence would have been Kaspar König's 1987 *Münster Skulptur Projekt*. Some of the sculptural works were more involved than simply placed in the park. He invited several artists who stretched the concept of sculpture a little bit further by working with the social fabric of the place. It ended up being a sculpture or maybe something else. Some artists, like Michael Asher, developed a process where the aspect of sculpture changed over time; it wasn't just a single element in a site.

**JF/JC:** *Sonsbeek 93* was called a social art exhibition. You said that labels are a very easy way for people to deal with complex problems. Was the labelling an advantage for you or did you have to use a lot of energy to explain that some works were social art but not the whole project?

**VS:** I think these labels came well after the exhibition was over. During the preparation for *Sonsbeek 93* there was a feeling from the Communications department and the Trustees that the message of the exhibition wasn't coming across. In retrospect, this may seem surprising, because, of course, everybody is working in this way now but, at the time, I think it was a hard exhibition for people to swallow. Therefore, a program of talks was organized where I could go to a number of small city in Hol-

land and some cities in neighbouring countries to present the exhibition. I did a slide show and this was quite successful for the people who attended those talks. They became interested and there was a lot of enthusiasm, but often it was a small audience. *Sonsbeek* is not *Documenta*, where there is anticipation and everybody is anxious to hear what you have to say. But, I actually enjoyed the talks, because when you are discussing the work the complexity of it comes out, and you find more and more in the work to talk about. I think that's true for every subject, so this became an interesting part of the process, maybe more interesting for me than for the audience. I don't know if it had an impact on getting more people to see the show.

**JF/JC:** *Sonsbeek 93* was planned as a discourse of contemporary art between the art, the artists and society. Did that function, especially with the public from Arnhem?

**VS:** You know that's a hard one to answer, because there are several levels to this. When I first arrived, the people of Arnhem wanted me to learn Dutch; there was no time to do this. But, because I didn't know Dutch I couldn't read the papers, so I didn't know what the press had written about *Sonsbeek 93*. I did find out, through my Dutch colleagues, that the press was very critical and negative. But I was, for the most part, oblivious to this and wouldn't allow myself to focus on it. I have to say that many of the pieces were really brilliant. The artists had come up with great projects; it was just beautiful and very moving for me to see. If the public couldn't see that through the difficulties of getting there or the weather or the demands of the distances between works or whatever they were complaining about, then it's their loss. During the exhibition I had a horrible conversation with the designer of the catalogue, who told me that he thought the book was better than the exhibition (he had not seen the entire exhibition at the time). The book is all about the process, which was my idea, so I don't know how he could have concluded in such a way. I know that with these big exhibitions, like anybody's *Documenta* or *biennale*, you have certain pieces that are wonderful and brilliant, which become key pieces, and others, for various explainable reasons, are maybe not as good. With these big shows you can never win a 100%, it's just the way it is.

**JF/JC:** How do you handle the situation when you have the feeling that the work of an artist is not going to be as strong?

**VS:** In *Sonsbeek 93*, for instance, there were a few pieces for which there comes a point of no return. So you have to kind go with it. If you are not so busy and distracted that you can feel in the beginning that it's really not working, then you can make the hard and terrible choice of saying so and stop production. But if you don't catch it early, and, because of the way the process is going, you don't see what the result will be, you wait and give the artist time. At some point it becomes too late. So if it's not too detrimental to the artist, then I don't really care about myself, I let it pass and put the emphasis on the better work. It's an experiment. Not every work can be perfect. Everyone hopefully learns from it, so it is all right.

Sometimes when you deal with a number of very young artists who are not seasoned, this can happen; on the other hand, it is just as likely to happen with older experienced artists, too. Maybe it is the fault of the curator for inviting them in the first place and for allowing them to make those experiences. I don't regret these moments, I think it's just part of the process when you work with new productions, there is a risk, and when it fails there is always something positive to gain from it, there's always a reason. It can have to do with the lack of money, or the artist didn't spend enough time thinking it through, or the site was not a good match, or I wasn't there to help them, or the relationship and understanding wasn't strong enough between us or some artists are too shy to ask for attention. If you're working with 40 or more artists some get more attention than others. So there are all these variables, but in the end you must be philosophical about it. Or, work more closely with a smaller group of artists.

**JF/JC:** How would you describe your approach to curating?

**VS:** I like to work directly with artists and develop new projects for a particular space. It's always been a way of working that I have enjoyed, especially when I have a good team, and, given the opportunity, I think most artists enjoy it too. It is not so often that artists are offered the time and money to develop new work. There are challenges involved with working in this way, often due to time constraints, as well as financial and spatial/logistic considerations. At the same time, there is nothing more rewarding than researching a little known or forgotten subject in depth and presenting your findings in book or exhibition form. It's like uncovering a mystery and sharing it.

**JF/JC:** Do you visit a lot of exhibitions to inspire yourself and become familiar with new curatorial practices?

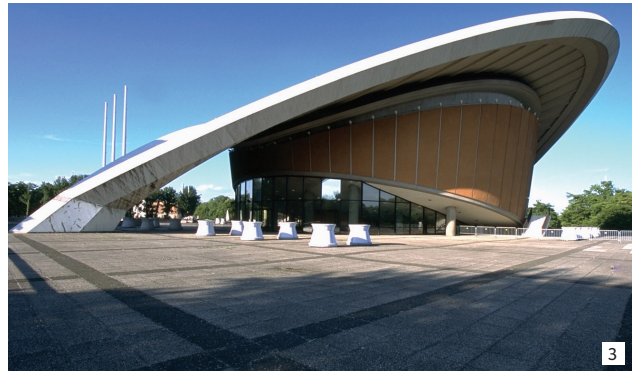
**VS:** Is there such a thing as a new curatorial practice? Currently academia is flooded with curatorial study programs, there are new ones sprouting up every week, according to e-flux advertisements. Clearly there is a demand and universities and academies are anxious to fulfil this trend as well as their coffers at a time when many institutions are in crisis. The crisis is the failure to properly educate students. Studies of this kind should be folded into the study of art history, rather than kept separate in order to create a track that takes more administration and money. The self-importance of some of these programs is annoying. But, then perhaps I am old school.

It is also a bit of a fallacy that people who work full-time for art institutions have time to see exhibitions. They largely steal the time to do so while sacrificing something or someone on the other end. But, this is particular to those of us who have family responsibilities on top of institutional pressures. No one likes to hear about it, no one talks about it; it is just a bad pill you reluctantly swallow. That said the best-stolen moments visiting exhibitions I have had are with artists, who are the most critical and also a lot of fun to discuss art with. However, mainly my inspirations come from outside contemporary art.

**JF/JC:** In the exhibition *Between Walls and Windows, Architektur und Ideologie* (2012) you reduced the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin to its original condition as the former Kongresshalle, a Berlin symbol of the Cold War. You removed the new cashier at the entrance, cut the artificial lights and new signage, and even opened every access from all four sides of the building. With this action you made this very iconic building into a sculpture, recovering the purity it had just after it was built. It's quite clear that you acted in this case as an artist yourself by creating this sculpture. Was it the first time for you to interfere in this way?

**VS:** I do not think this was an artistic act, but a necessary gesture of honesty to prepare the context of the exhibition's argument for the artists and architects who participated. It made the exhibition credible, without it the exhibition would have failed or been a lot less strong. Yes, I believe it was the first time I consciously set the stage for an exhibition in such an extreme way. Most spaces I've worked in

have been more or less "exhibition ready" they haven't needed or called for such a radical intervention on my part; I usually leave this to the artist or architect. While the concept of complete "disclosure" of the former Kongresshalle was very much in place at the beginning of the exhibition process, several key artist's and architect's projects in *Between Walls and Windows* underscored our commitment to it.



I've always been interested in architecture and have worked with architects since Artists Space, so for this last exhibition at HKW I developed the project that seemed appropriate to what this institution stood for, inside and out. It became very clear that the architectural and artistic interventions had to be on the periphery of the building so that the centre could reveal the ideological construction of the program. You walked into the centre to orient yourself and then had to find the work, a little bit like *Sonsbeek 93*. The interior had been bastardised through the different agendas of successive administrations; there was a lot of visual garbage obfuscating interior perspectives: flyers, cards, signage, furniture, etc. We just cleaned it out and convinced dissenting voices that the building needed to return to its original condition as close as possible. We turned off all the lights, opened all the doors, and made it open and free to the public for one month.

Before one couldn't properly see the building's interior, which is as symbolic as its exterior. There is one point during the day where the light would come in from the fenestration above and shoot right down into the *Unterfoyer*, lighting up the underground level. You could see very clearly how the light started to play into the building, which is the whole purpose of this idea of transparency. In this way the "open and free" ideology of the building became clear from the inside, not just the outside that everybody knows. The exhibition would not have worked if we hadn't orchestrated this; and, it was thanks to key members of the team, who argued hard for certain changes, that we were able to accomplish this.

It must be said that the Haus, like many art institutions, hosts many different events. They often rent parts of the building to outside organizations, which means there are no dedicated spaces just for art. One has to book well in advance, and even then one is subject to changes, often changes one has to pay out of the exhibition budget. Since *Between Walls and Windows* took over the entire building we negotiated to get one solid month without severe interruptions. One month is not enough time for most people to see an exhibition. Nevertheless, it is documented and was an important milestone for me and for many of us who worked on it.

**JF/JC:** What do you think are the differences between artists and curators? Do they share the same theoretical background?

**VS:** Essentially, they are two very different species; sometimes I get the impression they are at opposite ends. The spectrum of skills required for each profession can be very broad and vary greatly depending on the context. But, this does not mean that they cannot share the same theoretical background or have a successful practice in both fields; there are many historical examples of this. One learns something when curators and artists take on each other's roles. That said I have generally found artist curated exhibitions more interesting than when a curator as a curator intervenes or interferes, as the case maybe, "artistically" with an artist's work. This can be awkward and disastrous. When artists curate it is usually to contextualize their own work within a set of issues. There, I am a bit more forgiving, because even if it is not successful, it is usually amusing. My philosophy has been that the artist has primacy in the relationship. I like to give artists every opportunity to realize their vision exactly as they want it, of course, within financial and logistical

reason. I want artists to be as ambitious as possible, while I take on the role of facilitator, otherwise why do it? Naturally, this changes when working with dead artists and historical material. In both cases, a curator's work should be seamless, perfectly integrating all elements to the point.

### Captions

- 1 Valerie Smith with Irene Hohenbüchler © Sonsbeek 93, Arnhem
- 2 Mike Kelley with Heidi statues © Sonsbeek 93, Arnhem
- 3 HKW side view © Affolter / Eugster
- 4 Opening, 01.09.2012 © Affolter / Eugster

**Valerie Smith** is a freelance curator and writer based in Berlin. As the former Head of Visual Arts, Film and Digital Media at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, she commissioned new work by architects and artists among them, *Between Walls and Windows. Architektur und Ideologie*, (2012) with Amateur Architecture Studio, Supersudaca, Markus Miessen, Ângela Ferreira, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle; *Über Wut* (2010) with Klara Lidén, Mike Rakowitz, Jimmie Durham; and *Rational/Irrational* (2008) including Javier Tellez, Artur "Bispo" di Rosario, Hanna Darboven. At HKW she also initiated the project room, *Labor Berlin*, for Berlin-based-foreign-born international artists. As Senior Curator and Exhibition Director of the Queens Museum of Art she curated many exhibitions among them award winners, Joan Jonas, *Five Works* (2003) and *Down the Garden Path, The Artists' Garden After Modernism* (2004). As Director of Sonsbeek 93 in Arnhem, NL she commissioned 42 new artists' projects among them Mike Kelley's *The Uncanny*.