

Wendy Gers is a curator and arts administrator who seeks to push the social, political, and technological boundaries of ceramics. Her peripatetic career includes curating biennales in Taiwan and China as well as unique exhibitions, such as her recent Post-colonialism? project at the Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Centre in Israel.

The following conversation addresses curating on an international stage, focusing on the dynamics of Gers's Post-Colonialism? project.

MARTINA LANTIN: I'm interested in how as a curator of several international exhibitions, you determine the overall vision or unifying element for such events. As this issue is about borders and boundaries, one component of that is examining the impact of contemporary art practice on geographical or political borders and vice versa. From a North American perspective, much of what is curated or accessible to view is work produced locally, regionally, or nationally. From my perspective, the border between Canada and the United States is palpable. Sharing artwork across this boundary is challenging, and there is a lack of awareness between the two countries. How do national boundaries affect your practice as an arts administrator and curator working in Europe?

WENDY GERS: National boundaries have a huge influence on my practice as a curator. On a global scale, the question of borders is especially significant at the present moment, as Trump investigates extending the border wall between the United States and Mexico, and Britain leaves Europe over questions of national

sovereignty. Borders are at the heart of many of my projects, as so many important issues, both political and personal, are shaped and influenced by issues of nation and nationality.

ML: What drives you to develop international projects and, more specifically, how have your home country of South Africa and your adopted homeland of France colored your curatorial practice?

WG: I am interested in the margins and marginalized voices and who determines what is marginal! In my various international curatorial projects, these core interests are articulated within specific national and local contexts. Addressing the borders is an inherently political act that translates into my interest in social justice, the environment, sustainability, and new technologies. These themes span my research and curatorial projects.

My projects aim to create rich and inclusive dialogues and are characterized by a global diversity of artists representing multiple disciplines (fine art, traditional craft, design, jewelry, video, photography, performance, architecture), young and mature, from the north and south, and minorities (LGBTQ as well as ethnic minorities).

I see my work as creating platforms for artists to engage with a team and a curator in dialogue about the boundaries of their practice. I take risks with younger artists and create platforms for them. This is fundamental to who I am. People have taken risks and given me opportunities, and I would like to extend this faith and generosity to others.

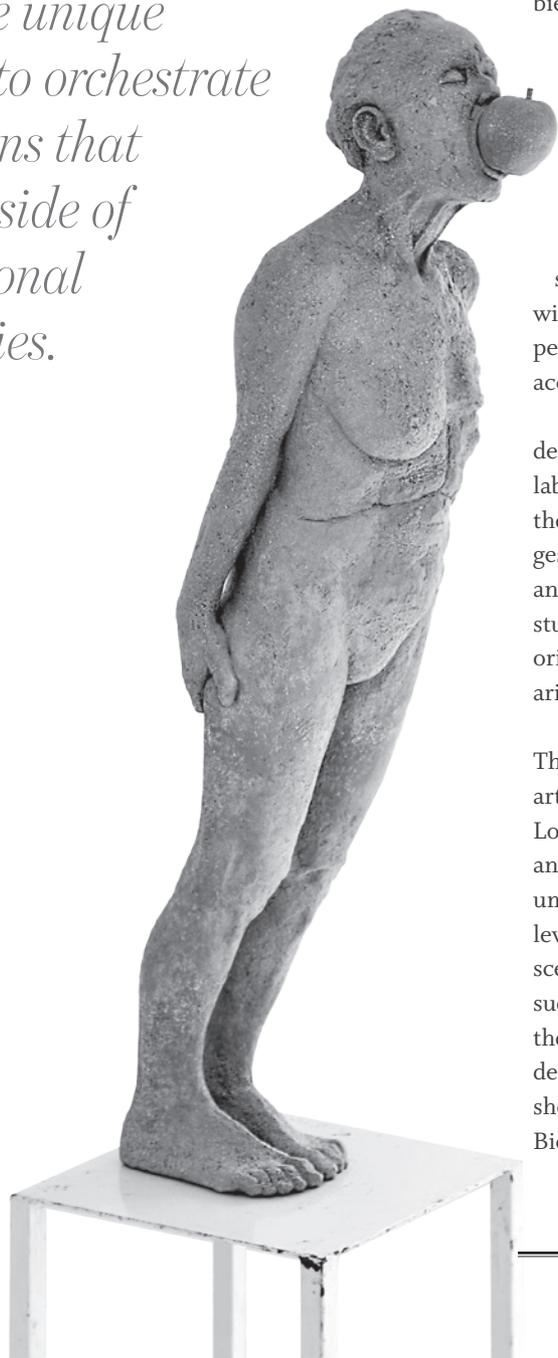
In terms of my curatorial practice, I was educated in South Africa and worked as a curator at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art



Curator Wendy Gers photographed by Zamir Nega at the opening gala of Post-Colonialism?, Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2016.

Independent curators are in the unique position to orchestrate exhibitions that work outside of conventional boundaries.

► *Eva Avidar, My Choice, 2016. Clay, hand-built. All photographs by Shay Ben Efraim, unless otherwise noted.*



Museum in Port Elizabeth for five years. As a student, I participated in the anti-apartheid movement and was marked by the democratic transition. The first and second Johannesburg biennales of 1995 and 1997 (the latter curated by the legendary Okwui Enwezor) were especially influential for me as a young curator. They featured strong local and international content and encouraged vociferous critical scrutiny of historic imbalances and how they were manifested in the domain of art. Both biennales served as vibrant platforms for engaging with local contemporary art in a contradictory period of slow and painful reconstruction and accelerated globalization.

France has been my home for over a decade, and I currently codirect a research laboratory, *La Céramique comme Expérience*, at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Limoges (ENSA), which focuses on ceramics, glass, and new technologies. I love working with our students and resident artists and developing original research projects that push the boundaries of established practices.

Living in northern France is a privilege. There is a sublime depth and density to the artistic scene in Europe. I spend a lot of time in London, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Cologne, and other cities, where I visit an array of museums and art centers. I particularly revel in the level of discourse within the contemporary art scene and spaces for experimental museology, such as the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, or Le Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel in Switzerland. Visiting big shows, such as Dutch Design Week, Venice Biennale, Ars Electronica, is a passion.

ML: It is obvious from your writings and curatorial decisions that true global representation is a top priority for you in the realization of your projects. How would you characterize the most salient challenges that remain for a truly global dialogue to exist for the field of ceramics? What strategies do you employ to insure a global perspective?

WG: Firstly, access to education and to a broader understanding of the complex workings of the globalized arts landscape is a luxury denied to most non-western artists. Similarly, most developing countries lack professional art, craft, and design historians to tell their stories of local artists and, most especially, crafters. Many artists from developing countries are financially exploited by western artists, agents, and galleries. Furthermore, the pitfalls of western markets for contemporary art versus contemporary design, folk art, studio crafts or outsider art, are nuanced and brutally difficult to navigate. These markets engage with different collectors, dealers, and heritage institutions. The degree of professional recognition and the respective prices of works in these categories may vary significantly.

In terms of strategies for ensuring a truly global dialogue, the challenge is to choose a theme that is inclusive for artists from developing and developed nations. It is essential to find a balance between social and intellectual pertinence, originality, and accessibility. I also try to include a variety of works, ranging from overtly conceptual or intellectual to whimsical and playful.

ML: You have curated several international exhibitions: *Terra-Nova*, the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, *Cont(r)act Earth*, the first Central China

International Ceramics Biennale in Henan, China, and *Post-Colonialism?* at the Benyamini Centre in Israel. How do you balance the national perspectives with international ones as components of these events?

WG: Each exhibition project is unique and situated within specific cultural and social contexts. Because of their large budgets and public visibility, they play a key role in local politics. In addition, these shows further develop cultural tourism, as well as local, national, and international diplomacy projects. For example, the 2014 Taiwan Biennale was used as a lobbying platform during the Taiwanese local elections, commonly known as the nine-in-one elections, to elect the municipal mayors, municipal councilors, chiefs, and councilors of indigenous districts within municipalities.

I spend lots of time with the leaders of my host institutions, discussing the importance of finding a balance between local, national, and international components. There are no universal ratios for what constitutes an “international” biennale, and this requires delicate negotiation. For example, budgetary constraints cause many European ceramics biennales to invite “foreign” local residents to confer a token appearance of cosmopolitanism! In Asia, I lobbied biennale organizers on the importance of being “gracious” hosts, as they are pressured by local government to include as many as possible home-team heroes.

I appreciate national humility and generosity as exemplified by the 2013 Venice Biennale swap of pavilions between France and Germany. The German pavilion did not include a single German artist! Susanne

Gaensheimer, curator of the German pavilion, included works by China’s Ai Weiwei, the French-Iranian Romuald Karmakar, South African Santu Mofokeng, and India’s Dayanita Singh. These artists are all politically engaged and have close ties to Germany. While there are many incredible German artists, the choice of international artists with ties to Germany was a magnificently symbolic gesture of humility and grace.

On a more personal note, I believe that we are living in an age of increasingly strong “tribal” identities and paradoxically closed communities. Art is a means to foster dialogue between individuals and communities. I feel that it is essential to re-create a sense of enchantment through art and proactively build bridges across communities characterized by disparities of income, education, opportunities, and world views.

ML: An important aspect of each of the exhibitions you curated was an international residency. Artists from abroad were able to spend time in the host country making work for the show. Could you describe your process of choosing artists for these opportunities?

WG: In each project, I research artists whose works corresponds to the theme of the exhibition and simultaneously respects a variety of demographic factors including race, age, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability as well as philosophical, political, and religious beliefs. I also endeavor to show artists who are not known in a specific region, thereby guaranteeing a freshness to the exhibition. Extensive research is essential for ensuring originality, diversity, and pluralism.

ML: What dynamic do these local residencies play on the reception of the exhibition by the national audience?

WG: Residencies enable foreign artists to learn about regional issues and have firsthand, nuanced experiences of local culture and civil society. It also allows local artists to develop dialogues, new international friendships, and professional networks with foreign artists. Original content, including artwork by foreign artists whose work is not locally known, inevitably attracts local and international press. The inclusion of a significant number of international artists in an exhibition may allow an institution to put challenging issues on the table, as was the case with *Post-colonialism?* and *Cont{r}act Earth*. Furthermore, ambitious projects enable the forging of new partnerships and alliances. For example the *Post-Colonialism?* residency and exhibition was the first common project that all the art academies and art faculties in Israel participated in.

ML: The *Post-Colonialism?* project at the Benyamini Centre is a compelling proving ground to demonstrate the benefits of bringing people of disparate backgrounds who are linked by a common medium together to tackle challenging issues in a very contested part of the world. Within the context of this project, how do you define postcolonialism?

WG: We live in a world that is increasingly considered to be postcolonial, as the chapter associated with the historical scramble by western powers for foreign territory and resources seems closed. Yet, many contemporary examples of neocolonial projects exist, as



Q & A

Left:
Oren Arbel and
Noam Tabenkin
Arbel, First
Reduction (detail),
2016. Clay, wheel-
thrown and altered.

Right:
Installation view of
Post-Colonialism?
exhibition, Tel Aviv,
Israel. Foreground:
Pablo Ponce, Broken
Embraces, 2016.
Background: Rock
Wang, U Need
Code, 2016.



access to territory and resources is still highly polemical within many regions. Consider, for example, China's status as Africa's largest trading partner, investing billions of dollars in African governments and infrastructure in return for the petroleum and minerals that fuel the Chinese economy.

The Israeli situation is far more complex than economic exploitation, as it involves a contested territory as a legitimate homeland for Jews and a solution to millennia of anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, Israel's failure to accept that Palestine/Judea/Israel was an inhabited territory has resulted in a long-term internal conflict that remains unresolved. The state that welcomes any Jew in the world as a

response to anti-Semitism has needed to expand and secure its borders. Since 1946 Israel has invaded virtually every nation that shares its borders, annexed neighboring land, and seized great quantities of Palestinian territory. The Israeli state continues to use military and legal mechanisms to seize and expropriate land for governmental and private use. The land issue is made more complex by ongoing racial tensions, and religious and identity politics. Supremacist fantasies that Israel is a European or western nation render it incapable of assimilating into the Middle East.

The decolonization of Israel, an intrinsic corollary to the ongoing "colonial" project, is fraught because internal settlements have no

real form of spatial separation from Israeli-occupied territories. Furthermore, vast numbers of Palestinian refugees and exiles are living outside Israel's formal borders. What is essentially a carefully crafted land-grab by the Israeli state has become a paradoxically global dialogue about displaced peoples, human rights abuses, and geo-political strategy in the Middle East, in the same way that the decolonization project may be argued to be a nebulous "elsewhere"—a series of open-ended discussions on indigenization, autonomy, anti-state- and anti-capitalist-politics.

While *Post-Colonialism?* purported to explore the meaning and relevance of post-colonialism within contemporary Israel, it soon



◀ *Ayelet Zohar, Villa in the Jungle, 2016. Camouflage nets over Benyamini Center, supported by the Arts Department, Cultural Division of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality and the Yehoshua Rabinovich Tel Aviv Foundation for the Arts. Photograph by Yael Gur and Zamir Nega.*

became abundantly clear that local iterations of post-colonialism were intimately entangled, and dominated by Settler Colonialism. Premised on occupation and the elimination of indigenous populations, Settler Colonialist research focuses on authority, and how invasive settler societies, over time, develop distinctive identities, narratives of self-determination and sovereignty.

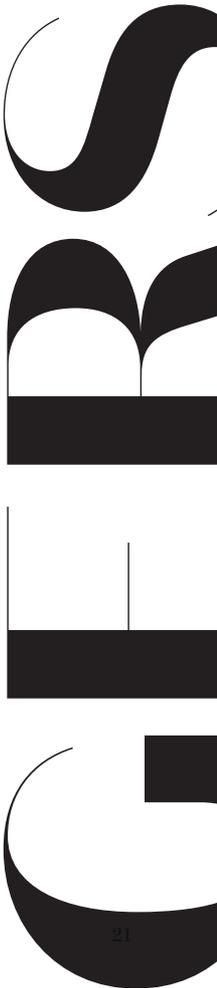
ML: As a way to familiarize all participants with the complex issues you describe, *Post-Colonialism?* broke established norms and included a reading group, lecture series, and research tour to engage in a broader discourse and an extended dialogue between international and Israeli artists.

On the website for the project you describe this as a process of learning, involving lots of debate and “often very painful dialogue.” How were these additional components determined and how did they alter or extend your role as curator?

WG: The leadership team of the Benyamini and I determined the additional components. We wanted to give local artists as well as the international residents an opportunity to learn more about postcolonialism in general (from a literary and philosophical perspective) as well as explore the diversity of local (Settler) colonial and neo-colonial relationships. The reading group ensured that we all shared the same conceptual and analytical tools, and could discuss

works with an appropriately nuanced lexis.

The research tour included a series of lectures and visits to relevant sites. For example, we had a guided visit of the Dead Sea, the world’s saltiest water body, that is also the lowest elevation on land—421.5 meters below sea level. Our visit commenced with a lecture by the geologist Dr Carmit Ish Shalom. She focused on the over-exploitation of this incredible natural resource as a result of the uncoordinated competition among the mineral industry (salt and potassium), tourism, and agriculture. This ruthless exploitation is causing the sea’s rapid exsiccation, and extensive, hazardous sink-holes around its rim. We also visited a Bedouin nonprofit organization, Desert Em-



Through courageous leadership, curators have the capacity to build new visions of community and contemporary ceramics.

broidery: The Association for the Improvement of Women's Status, in Lafia, southern Israel. This pioneering embroidery program generates income for Bedouin women and preserves traditional handicrafts. They also operate a mobile library serving more than 1,500 children and educational programs for women and youth.

ML: The Benyamini project had multiple facets that challenged physical, political, and mental boundaries. These, I imagine, were so individualized in the way they are experienced and concretized through the work. Can you speak to one work, or a group of works, that resonates for you as the strongest success of the project?

WG: I view exhibitions as polyphonic musical scores. If one removes or isolates any single element, the piece no longer works. Many of the works and installations were site-specific, created for specific areas within the building, and derive their meaning from the dialogue with

their site. An exhibition is an experience of the sum of its constituent components, and I cannot isolate any elements without doing an injustice to the whole.

When I realized how small the exhibition space was, I wrote to all the artists and stated that the exhibition space was a metaphor for Israel. I encouraged the artists not to fight for the space and to be flexible. As a curator, I moved many installations around a few times to make the exhibition work for everyone. Clear communication was key to making the process work. No big egos, no occupation of space, no big territories. As the curator, I worked to find logic, melody, and composition in concert with artists. In placing the works, I sought to create dialogues that would work spatially and conceptually. Throughout the residency, I didn't direct the artists' individual projects, but rather, I kept the conversations open to support the artists' ownership of their work and help them to best articulate their ideas.

Most of the installations in *Post-Colonialism?* spoke of the current Israeli-Palestinian relationship in metaphorical terms. The pain is deep; Israeli-Palestinian society is split and civil society is so dysfunctional, with little hope for peace. The situation cannot be reduced to banal clichés of brutal soldiers, endless ugly walls, checkpoints, forced demolitions, etc. *Post-Colonialism?* thus did not contain gratuitous images of violence or suffering. Rather, the works responded to the human condition via highly personal experiences of domination and manifest borders as well as shattered biological and geographical landscapes. Works delved into local literature, poetry, architectural heritage, and performance and wrested with postcolonial

and Settler Colonial theories. The resulting exhibition was original, evocative, and poetic.

ML: In your statement on the website, you articulate that the international artists who took part in the residency and exhibition faced questions about the International Cultural Boycott [of Israel]. You then state that the experience of the residency and subsequent exhibition confirmed for the artists their resolution "to respectfully speak out." I recognize the challenge of articulating the perspective of many people; can you discuss ways in which this has manifested for you?

WG: Regarding "speaking out respectfully," I chose these words very carefully, and toned down the rhetoric. For example, I deliberately chose not to use words like "resistance" in the introductory text. The Benyamini Center and its staff may be persecuted and suffer the consequences of showing an exhibition of this nature. The engagement of the artists and works speak for themselves. I didn't need to highlight the obvious in my introduction! Is this self-censorship? No. I see it as a sign of political maturity and a way of ensuring the art works and installations have center-stage.

Regarding the Cultural Boycott, some of the participating artists and I faced intellectual challenges from colleagues, family, and strangers, regarding visiting and working in Israel. The issue of participating was particularly difficult for the sole Palestinian artist, Manal Morcos. After the exhibition, I had my computer hacked by anti-Israeli forces, who posted vulgar anti-Israeli slogans on my Facebook homepage. This is a very small price to pay for the privilege of heading such a project.

ML: Are there other sites where you foresee developing a project such as this, and what components would play (or are playing) into such a selection?

WG: I hope to continue facilitating socially and environmentally engaged projects in places and spaces that do not usually consider these types of issues. There is a clear need for the craft sector to “stand up and be counted,” and to produce relevant, engaged exhibitions within this period of increasing domination by conservative forces.

My clients and I work closely to determine the intention, scope, and focus of each project. Originality and excellence are my goals. I strive to ensure that all parties are be correctly remunerated. The exploitation of artists and curators is widely institutionalized, especially within craft circles, and is not an acceptable professional practice.

ML: I am intrigued by the call for craft to “stand up and be counted.” Does craft hold a unique capacity to generate sites of social engagement and dialogue towards change? I am thinking of the ubiquitous nature and accessibility of craft materials and methods. I sometimes sense a perception among critics, artists, and funding organizations that craft-works are “for the people,” so I am curious to understand your emphasis on craft here.

WG: The idea that “craft is for the people” is problematic. I view this as a western construct that privileges certain western art forms, at the expense of others. It also suggests pejoratively that craft is a popular



art form and doesn't need to be taken seriously. The art/craft divide was engineered in a specific historical context and articulates specific Eurocentric cultural, gender-specific, and economic tropes. If we were to flatten this hierarchy, and all so-called crafts were treated with the same respect as so-called fine arts, we would have a totally different scenario.

Firstly, there would be a lack of theorists and historians for the bulk of art practices! Secondly, the language of art would need significant revision, as terms such as “crafted” and “materiality” (among many others) would be applied to paintings, films and photography. This would force theorists to engage with, and perhaps invent new lexical approaches to diverse media and materials.

ML: In conclusion, what are you interested in pursuing for your next curatorial project?

WG: I have curated exhibitions in Africa, Europe, and Asia. My dream is to curate in the Americas—there are so many wonderful topics to dig into! How about “post-truth”? What does this mean to a domain such as ceramics, where the medium is characterized by an incredible capacity to mimic other materials and is both fragile and virtually indestructible? Or how about exploring ceramic archives and questions of inclusion and exclusion in national and regional art-historical narratives?

Editor's Note: This conversation took place via e-mail and telephone between April 14 and July 4, 2017, and has been edited for clarity and length.

▲ *Modisa*
Tim Motsomi
installing his work
Terra-Incognita,
Terra-Nullius,
Terra-Pericolosa,
2016. Ceramic and
vinyl adhesive.
Photograph by
Zamir Nega.