

The Curator

NANCY SPECTOR IS THE GUGGENHEIM'S BEACON OF CONTEMPORARY ART.

By Christopher Bollen

Nancy Spector is exceptionally petite. She dresses in conservative black pants suits and speaks in a quiet, frank tone — qualities that might render her one of the least noticeable presences in the flashy phantasmagoria of the Frieze Art Fair. Only Spector's reputation is mammoth. She is not only responsible for curating contemporary art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but it was also her controversial decision to select the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres for the American Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. She also organized this fall's Matthew Barney-Joseph Beuys exhibition, "everything in the present must be transformed," at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. So the Frieze high rollers are on full Spector alert.

After a quick coffee with the French artist Pierre Huyghe, she now stands with the German artist Carsten Höller in the Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall as visitors drop through the artist's latest installation — five vertiginous tubular slides — and fly like giddy children onto the landing pads. For Spector, the playground atmosphere is museum business. Both Huyghe and Höller are part of an experimental group show, "the anyspacewhatsoever," Spector is curating at the Guggenheim in 2008. While Höller explains the "altered reality" of his piece, Spector contemplates the possibility of installing a slide in the Guggenheim rotunda. "I have two children back in New York," she says. "I'm familiar with playgrounds."

Spector is also an authority on the playground of contemporary art. Her role for the three days she's in London shifts seamlessly between ambassador for the museum's interests and tour guide for affluent Guggenheim patrons on the prowl. Moreover, along with the museum's director, Lisa Dennison, Spector isn't opposed to picking up a few prize works for the institution's collection. "We don't usually buy at art fairs," she explains, "but that isn't to say we haven't." After the Tate, Spector drops in on afternoon tea with several of the museum's patrons and joins the group on an excursion through several West End art galleries. At Sadie Coles, Spector steps in to give a spontaneous lecture on the young Polish painter Wilhelm Sasnal. If part of her function is to play the genial hostess, she is equally expected to be the museum's visionary augur, unlocking the meanings of the canvases the affluent Guggenheimers can easily afford but do not yet understand.

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Is it good? Can this artist be trusted? Spector's speech seems to assure the rich and the interested that, yes, Sasnal, is worth their time.

On the morning of the V.I.P. viewing, Spector arrives promptly at 11 as the floodgates open, and off go the collecting elite, and the institution heads into the labyrinth of galleries under the tent of Regent's Park. Spector and Dennison split up but are a phone call away from any acquisition-committee member who needs to know the importance of a particular painting or sculpture. "As a curator, all you really want to do at the end of the day is build a collection," she says. "If you help build a patron's collection, you hope ultimately for a donation. They can buy it as a promise gift to the museum." In the current art market, virtually no museum can compete with private money, so Spector continually answers her cellphone, offering her opinion. "It's not expensive — it's nothing," she says. Two minutes later, "We have photographs, we need sculpture," she strains. Dennison phones to tell her to look at a Jenny Saville painting at Gagosian. If the two agree on the merit of the work, they can put it on "reserve," after which the museum will consider it with the appropriate parties and get first dibs on the acquisition.

At every turn through the tent, Spector is bombarded with a case of the Hi, Nancy's. "Hi, Nancy," Barbara Gladstone says in front of an early Matthew Barney mixed-media piece. "Hi, Nancy," David Zwirner says near an installation by Francis Alÿs. "Hi, Nancy," Jay Jopling calls in front of a Cerith Wyn Evans photograph. Every dealer and his or her gaggle of comely assistants breaks through the crowd to greet Spector and offer her "anything, anything at all." In the first few hours, Dennison and Spector have put reserves on three works. "We prefer collecting in depth on certain artists," Spector says. "But this is increasingly difficult." Sure enough, the Tate has swept in early (rumor has it, before the gates even opened to the V.I.P.'s) and put a reserve on an Alÿs eyed by the Guggenheim crew. When Spector returns to the Barney five minutes after first seeing it, the work is already gone.

In the few hours she has left before her flight back to New York, Spector is released from her duties as all-knowing tour guide and takes in a few local exhibitions, like the Wynn Evans at the ICA and Saatchi's "USA Today" at the Royal Academy. A curator's life is always geared to the next opening in the next city, where the work accumulated will be read from her own point of view. "After the fair," she says, relaxing for the first time in the taxi, "it will be nice to see something curated."

