

Chief Eternal Optimist

Yana Peel is reinventing Britain's Serpentine Galleries, taking them into the digital age and beyond.

by Carol Kino

THINK OF LONDON'S most important art sites and among the first that spring to mind are the Serpentine Galleries in Kensington Gardens. With its annual temporary pavilion designed by a major architect like Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid, its must-see shows by artists such as Marina Abramovic and Gerhard Richter, and its brand-new digital art program, the gallery has grown from a genteel British exhibition space into an international destination. This change was overseen by Julia Peyton-Jones, its director since 1991 until she stepped down last year. In April, the baton was passed to board member Yana Peel, who was named chief executive officer. (Hans Ulrich Obrist, Peyton-Jones's codirector for the last 10 years, is now the artistic director.)

As Peel says, "I've been telling the team that I'm the chief eternal optimist"—a chirpy title that belies her formidable résumé. In addition to having cofounded the groundbreaking cultural philanthropy Outset Contemporary Art Fund, she cochairs Intelligence Squared, another pioneering group that stages live Oxford-style debates and distributes them on the Internet. She was also a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, cochairs the Hong Kong international art space Para Site, and has almost too many museum advisory and board positions to count, at Tate, the Victoria & Albert, Lincoln Center, and others.

Peel sees her role at the Serpentine

as "very much about creating a sustainable ecology for the art to thrive, and working in partnership with Hans Ulrich to create an exciting and inclusive hub." Obrist puts it more succinctly: "Yana has so many different contacts outside the art world, she has great experience with the digital, and she has lived in three different continents. Together, we can develop the strategic vision for the 21st and 22nd century."

Born in Russia and raised in Canada from the age of 6, Peel studied at the London School of Economics and worked at Goldman Sachs before cofounding Outset in 2003. Outset pioneered a lively, entrepreneurial brand of arts philanthropy at a time when government support was dwindling, using crowd-funding to buy art from the first Frieze fair for Tate Modern; they later set up funds for other institutions, too. (Some of those early Tate acquisitions were from three artists who later became Turner Prize winners: Jeremy Deller, Mark Leckey, and Simon Starling.) Donors could also help produce artworks, like Roman Ondák's 2003 *Good Feelings in Good Times*, Tate's first performance purchase, or Steve McQueen's film *Giardini* for the British Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Patrons won entry to art events and parties around the world. "It wasn't just about being a passive donor," Peel says. "It was about visiting artists and becoming actively involved."

In 2009, she moved to Hong Kong



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with her husband, Stephen Peel, then a partner at TPG Capital, and launched the Hong Kong branch of Intelligence Squared. Her stroke of genius was to bring their debates, in which both sides of a hot-button social position are argued before a live audience, to the international art world, partnering with the Hong Kong Art Fair and later with Art Basel in Hong Kong. The inaugural 2009 debate was "Finders, not keepers! Cultural treasures belong in their country of origin," with experts like Simon Jenkins, former head of Britain's National Trust, among those arguing for the motion, and Don Cohn, senior editor of *ArtAsiaPacific*, among those against. In May 2012, it was "Contemporary Art Excludes the 99%," with the artist Paul Chan pro, and Joseph Kosuth anti. The result was contentious, enlightening, and entertaining—and, because it was broadcast on the Internet, massive in reach.

Together with two partners, Peel bought a majority share in Intelligence Squared in 2012, but stepped down from active involvement when she became the Serpentine's CEO. Still, she's inspired by the non-partisan nonprofit's spirit.

Thinking forward to next summer's Venice Pavilion, to be designed by her newest board member, David Adjaye, Peel, 42, waxes eloquent about technology's power to reach multitudes, even people who may never visit the Serpentine gallery, which pulled a record 1.2 million visitors last year.

"We're thinking about the software as much as the hardware," Peel says, "and about what it means in a post-Brexit Britain to create bridges and not walls." Although they're still undecided about the form the pavilion will take, she adds, "We're looking at how we can reinvent it, and how we can harness the positive power of technology to create a deeper culture." She might just be the chief eternal optimist to make it happen. **ABMB**