



Centre for Contemporary Art opens

New director says it could be like a lab for exchange of ideas

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Founding director of Centre for Contemporary Art Ute Meta Bauer likens the centre to a laboratory where people from different parts of the art community can exchange ideas. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Drawn to art melting pot

Centre for Contemporary Art's multi-disciplinary nature of work led Ute Meta Bauer to join it

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The much-awaited Centre for Contemporary Art, touted as a new hub for art and research in the region, opened its doors yesterday and all eyes are on its founding director Ute Meta Bauer.

Professor Bauer, 55, who was appointed last week, has her work cut out for her at the centre run by the Nanyang Technological University in the Gillman Barracks art enclave off Alexandra Road.

Her well-burnished credentials include co-curating the prestigious contemporary art exhibition Documents in Germany in 2001 and being the founding director of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (2002 to 2005), which is known for its artist residency programmes.

Prior to joining the centre, she was dean of the school of fine arts at London's Royal College of Art, as well as associate professor for visual art at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founding director of its programme in art, culture and technology at the school of architecture and planning.

She was first approached for the position here early this year and she says candidly that she "didn't consider it" immediately; she had just begun her appointment at the Royal College of Art.

But the genial don was eventually persuaded by the unique proposition of the centre here and the challenge to set it up from scratch. She says: "To me, what is interesting is this unique combination of having a research centre, a residency programme and an exhibition space all in one place and how they could overlap."

She likens it to "a laboratory where everything goes hand in hand", a holistic space where creative sparks fly between intellectual and artistic pursuits,

and people from all parts of the art community including artists, curators, researchers and the audience, given the proximity for exchange of ideas.

And there are many possibilities for collaboration at the centre. Professor Bauer lists some: It could co-host seminars and workshops with Nanyang Technological University's faculty; international and Singaporean artists in its residency programme could collaborate with academics at the university and exhibit the product of their collaboration.

Indeed, the multi-disciplinary nature of work at the centre also swayed her to take up the post because it unites her diverse interests as an academic and curator.

Her extensive experience and expertise, however, do not make her immune to the heavy expectations placed on her.

The pressure has been building since Gillman Barracks, which comprises 14 pedigree galleries from 10 countries, opened last year. The research centre was envisioned as an anchor for the area and galleries there have high hopes for it to galvanise activity in the enclave, which has been plagued with visitorship woes.

The German-born bachelorette says calmly: "There is a three-year start-up phase and we are half-way through it, of course I feel the pressure of time. But it's a very small team and there are very big expectations, so one just has to be transparent and say this is how many we are and this is what we are trying to do, so bear with us."

The centre's team currently comprises six members, including deputy director and senior curator designate Lee Weng Choy, curator of exhibitions Anca Rujoiu from Romania and incoming curator of residencies Vera Mey from New Zealand.

Prof Bauer adds with a wry smile: "We always say it so easily, that we will collaborate or be inter-disciplinary, but when you do it, it takes quite some effort and time. This is why I'm saying we'll definitely not have it overnight."

Among the nitty gritty that needs to be tackled is making sure the space meets international exhibition standards.

Life's meeting with her two days ago was held in

a corner of the centre's exhibition hall where the team's makeshift office of a few tables, chairs and laptops was set up.

Yet even as the centre sorts itself out, she is wasting no time rallying her team to put together a calendar of activities, including its first major exhibition scheduled to coincide with the Art Stage fair next year.

It also launched an informal series of art events, lectures and screenings at its opening yesterday. The programme, titled Free Jazz, channels the spirit of jazz music-making and aims to partner the art community in a call-and-response manner to improvise and grow the centre and arts scene here.

Prof Bauer says: "We each come in with specific expectations, but we realise it might be slightly different here, so it requires improvisation, listening."

She openly acknowledges that she is "not an expert" in South-east Asian art history, although her work as a curator with an interest in global artistic production means she is familiar with art in the region. She has, for example, worked on art shows in China, held lectures in Indonesia and organised arts and cultural programmes with Vietnam. She was also involved in early consultations for the first Singapore Biennale held in 2006.

As for the expectation that the centre will be a crowd magnet for Gillman Barracks, she believes the cluster needs more than just a star attraction, it needs to have a vibe.

"The challenge here is it's a bit artificially constructed," she says. "What is really needed is more catering opportunities. A nice bookstore would be great. With more happening here, it would become more lively and it would be a place that people would go even if they don't go to a gallery or don't come to us."

She is similarly upbeat about the ambitious project she has been landed. "I'm not at the beginning of my career, I'm rather towards the end... so it's important to be in a place where I can contribute and this is an opportunity to do something at a place where we can have all of this discussion and produce something valuable."

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