Conversation with Victoria Ivanova
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your role with Serpentine?

Victoria Ivanova: I'm Victoria. I'm currently R&D—so, research and development—strategic lead at Serpentine, working within a team called Serpentine Arts Technologies. We focus on commissioning and producing artworks with artists who engage with emerging and advanced technologies. Part of that mandate extends to larger questions around culture, technology and society where we conduct R&D.

Serpentine is a contemporary art organization. We're a non-collecting art organization, so we're really focused on contemporary practices and on working with artists who are interrogating various critical issues of the day.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you find distinctive about the work that Serpentine does?

Victoria Ivanova: Given that our focus is on contemporary artistic practices and championing artists' role in society, I guess what's unique is that we're a fairly agile organization. Not just in terms of programming within the tracks of what art institutions are expected to do: developing new exhibitions and working with new artists and showing artworks to audiences. But we're also fairly agile in how we work with different other organizations and partners, extending the exploratory creative work that's frequently associated with the contemporary art field to transdisciplinary research in the context of art and technology and technological development.

In recent years, this has been the case with Initiation, something that I've been leading off the R&D platform at Serpentine. It's an offshoot from the Arts Technologies department that does precisely that. Our organization was happy to take the risk of opening up an opportunity for this type of program, where the focus isn't on output such as exhibitions and new artistic artworks, but rather the

development of multidisciplinary research on topics associated with technological challenges, and development of new prototypes for key areas where there's some kind of challenge when it comes to art, technology, and society. That expanded mandate is quite unique to Serpentine and to the way we operate.

Ashley Hopkinson: I was trying to think if there are any art institutions in the U.S. that tend to do similar work. Maybe Gray Area?

Victoria Ivanova: Yeah, for sure. I would also say NEW INC, which was founded as an experimental organizational offshoot from the New Museum, founded by a close colleague and a really good friend, Julia Kaganskiy. She was very early in terms of trying to provide an organizational platform for arts and technology communities that didn't really have an institutional home. So I think NEW INC is also a really good example of quite a unique organizational offer coming out of the art field. Although I would say their mandate is somewhat different to ours. I think the distinction ultimately comes down to Serpentine being a public arts organization in the UK. So we have a public mission. We're not private, despite the fact that we do a lot of fundraising in the private sector, and of course we have private foundations supporting our work. But in terms of our own corporation, we're a public organization. So the questions that we tend to focus on when it comes to culture, technology, and society are those that seem of particularly acute public importance.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have an example of what this looks like in real time? Is there anything that is currently in development, or has already been developed, that can illustrate the kind of impact that you're hoping to have?

Victoria Ivanova: Absolutely. I'll take a bit of a preamble just to give you more of an understanding of how we landed specifically on these prototype projects.

In the early years of Serpentine there were a lot of learnings around the complexities that are part of producing artworks that engage with advanced technologies. But there was really no platform or no channel for sharing these learnings. [In the R&D department,] one of the first things that we decided to do was to create more of a network with other colleagues from different organizations and civic spaces who have experience in conducting similar projects and are interested in sharing their learnings. This is how our Future Art Ecosystems strategic briefing series was born. It was meant to be this annual publication that shares these learnings with the wider sector, and tries to propose different approaches that various actors might take in terms of leveraging the evolving art and technology space as a laboratory for societal innovation. It was very much a collective intelligence project: we interviewed a lot of people, we did a lot of round tables.

We really tried to channel the zeitgeist in terms of perspectives and opinions that weren't making it to the most visible level or arena.

In the process of doing that, we realized there is something unique that the cultural sector has to offer to various emerging technological spaces such as blockchain and AI, because we're not really coming at these technologies from a market perspective. I mean, in some cases there is obviously an intersection between hype cycles and what the cultural industry is doing. But generally speaking, what artists and cultural actors are trying to do is look beyond the hype cycle. They're trying to understand the more fundamental questions associated with specific technologies, and to also imagine different futures that are possible through and with these technologies. So from quite early on, blockchain and AI became very core technologies on which our department specifically was focusing. In 2022, we published our annual Future Art Ecosystems briefing on art and decentralized technologies. What we wanted to do there was to look beyond the NFT and to think, what are the long-term affordances of blockchain technologies in terms of helping us rethink how we organize, how we think about governance in the cultural field, how we think about value distribution?

That project is how I came across RadicalxChange, because Matthew Prewitt, who is the president of RadicalxChange, was one of the interviewees for that edition. As I was interviewing him for this publication, it became apparent that there is a lot of synergy in how we are approaching blockchain, and how we're approaching this space and culture more generally as a really interesting context for developing alternative socioeconomic models.

So that slowly led us to honing in on an idea: wouldn't it be interesting to experiment with different ownership models in the art field by leveraging the affordances of smart contracts? Which are inherently agile in terms of being able to automate a more complex set of instructions than, say, buying and selling total exclusive assets.

This led to a collaboration that started early '23 to develop what is now known as the Partial Common Ownership system for art. It's a stewardship system, rather than an absolute ownership of art system, that's meant to help artists use their practices as a vehicle and as a voice for larger missions or communities that they're committed to.

Effectively it came out of this problem—and I think anyone you talk to in the art field would agree—that there is really no market for artists who are trying to respond to a critical issue or a way of helping a certain community in a specific struggle. I mean, sure, they can enter the art market and sell their works at art fairs. Or if they get gallery representation, which also doesn't happen very often. So

there's a supply and demand problem. Not that PCO solves the supply and demand problem, but what it does is offer a slightly different way for "investors" to come into those projects as stewards.

What the system allows for is a new supporter class or supporter archetype to come into existence.

We call these supporters stewards because what they're doing is helping artists and their affiliated communities steward a larger issue or become stakeholders in addressing a larger question. So the idea is that as the world gets ever more complex and the art is inherently constantly reflecting on these complexities, on these entanglements, art has been a really important engine of societal critique, at least in the last half a century. This is not going to go away. It's only going to potentially increase in importance, significance, and intensity because of the larger issues that the world is facing.

PCO is trying to preempt a world where this type of practice is really the predominant type of practice that exists, and tries to create appropriate market mechanisms for that type of practice by, initially, leveraging blockchain technology. But actually, Partial Common Ownership doesn't mean blockchain technology. It's a type of license. Blockchain is useful because it simplifies a lot of the mechanisms that are part of the system and automates them, but a simple license is also possible.

Ashley Hopkinson: How are the stewardship model and the Partial Common Ownership art system deviating from the status quo?

Victoria Ivanova: Traditionally there are two, maybe three ways in which artists sustain themselves economically. The first is by having gallery representation. It is very hard to get gallery representation, and even if one does, it is frequently insufficient for supporting oneself as an artist. It also means that your art enters the market as an asset that collectors will own in its entirety. They will have absolute and non-transferable rights over that asset. Effectively it operates in the most basic way in which private property operates, which is that once there's a transfer of title, there is an absolute right to the property and an absolute right to transfer that property subject to the new owner's wishes. When the work is sold, there's a specific split between the gallery and the artist that's subject to their agreement. It depends on the artist's status, how junior or senior they are, et cetera. This is in a nutshell how the art market model operates.

Many artists, even if they do enter gallery representation, that's not really sufficient for them to maintain their practices. If they're lucky, they get institutional shows. They get fees. Once again, that's a very volatile way of existing. But most artists will probably also have some sort of employment outside of their main practice, whether as teachers or in the technology context. These artists often also have various positions within the technology sector or do work for hire within more lucrative and

more liquid sectors. One final mode of receiving income is through various grants. That also takes a lot of time and is quite a complicated way of existing.

What Partial Common Ownership is trying to say is that there is really no reason why this slightly dysfunctional system has to be the only economic system in which artists should be able to operate as economic actors. Surely, we should have more markets, more economies, more logics for how artists enter the market. So that's premise number one.

Premise number two is that for artists who work with communities or artists who work on bigger issues, there's really no way for them to acknowledge the influence or the presence of these collaborators and these networks and these communities once the artwork enters the market, or even enters institutional circulation to some extent. In the best-case scenario I guess these communities or these larger causes are cited as references. Perhaps there is a voluntary philanthropic gift that's made towards these causes, et cetera.

PCO is trying to flip that on its head to say: What if we understand that these communities or these larger issues are integral to the artwork and integral to the artist's practice? Can we come up with a system for an art market that acknowledges that? Effectively, what happens when somebody becomes a steward is that one stewards the artwork on behalf of the artist and the community. One pays for one stewardship cycle, which is not permanent. It's a temporary cycle. When the cycle is over, the artwork goes back to auction.

The incumbent steward can recommit to the artwork, but when they do, they will need to pay a small fee to the community or to whoever the artist network is. If a new steward comes in, they will of course then pay the price to the old steward plus the fee. It's trying to create this dynamic value distribution engine that both performatively and economically shares the value increases that might exist in a given artwork with the communities and sometimes the artists, if they decide to be part of the community in terms of the fee, following the initial transfer of title. It tries to take the speculative dynamics out, but it also recognizes that it doesn't fully take them out.

In a sense, if you're a steward who believes this artwork will be very valuable in 20 years, you can keep hold of it by paying increasingly higher prices for it at consequent auctions. But because the fee is a percentage of that price, it means the higher the price, the higher is the fee that's paid to the community. I guess it's a more socialized form of doing speculation or long-term investment.

Ashley Hopkinson: It's like a land lease for art.

Victoria Ivanova: Totally.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is an insight or takeaway from doing this work that you think others can learn from?

Victoria Ivanova: Well, first of all, it's important to say with projects like PCO, we're at the very early stages of their existence in the world. So whether or not it's going to be taken up, how exactly it's going to be taken up, remains to be seen. We're doing some test projects with artists where we're trying to set some precedents and examples, and hopefully have this model stick and be taken up by others. But we really don't know what's going to happen. I guess from my experience of trying to incubate more innovative operational models in the cultural field, unsurprisingly I'd say it's an uphill struggle. It's probably an uphill struggle in most sectors.

On the one hand, the art field feels somewhat open. On the other hand, like any pre-existing system, there are various reasons why things are the way they are, and why it's very hard to unlock innovation in a way that it would actually resonate across the ecosystem. So with that in mind, I'm not deluded enough to think that just by us developing this model it will magically work.

I think what is really necessary is an institutional ecosystem that is the stewardship system as an infrastructure. Without the support of organizational clusters, it's going to be very, very difficult for this system to embed infrastructurally. I think the big learning is that it's never really enough to just put out a system or a technology. It's ultimately about how the organizational ecosystems and the infrastructures that are nurturing these technologies, or these new systems, are able to support and steward them into adoption.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you mean the incubation of a network where people continue to explore this, so there's a knowledge base for what this looks like, and people have a place to come if they're curious about exploring this particular part of the art world?

Victoria Ivanova: Sure. I mean, I think there's definitely that in terms of just onboarding and having a setting where this is made accessible. I also mean institutions and organizations and actors who take this model up and are actively using it. It's a community of practice in the early germination stages.

But then, in order to move beyond a temporary community of practice, it needs to translate into steadfast commitments by an ecosystem. I don't think it means that existing art institutions all need to take PCO onboard. I think it's okay if some do and if some adapt it, but I also think it'll be nice if new cultural organizations experiment with PCO. Or if artists who don't really want to work within the traditional art industry and are more interested in working, let's say with civic actors, take this model on and set this as one of the vehicles through which they work with civic organizations, for example.

It's exactly about this evolution from a specific experimental project to a more generalizable practice that can exist outside of us as the initiators and incubators of it.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the absence of a structure, because you're in this experimentation space, how do you measure progress?

Victoria Ivanova: Everybody you'll ask in the art field will say that the performative contradictions of selling community-developed artworks as art assets is an issue. Everybody will say that. So I can say the first glimmer was [realizing that] there is actually a system possible that could take us out of this performance of contradiction. That was the initial marker of why we should move ahead with developing this experiment. And then of course, along the way it became about having artists say that they wanted to test this out with us, getting a lot of positive response from artists who work in collaborative and networked ways and who are very keen to develop their practices outside of the art industry. That's a definite marker of success.

[Less certain] is this question of stewardship. It is still a bit unclear to me whether there is this generic category of stewards, the way that there's this generic category of collectors who are interested in collecting because they're all kind of partaking in the same cultural capital experiments. They all belong to the same system. They want to collect artworks that are shown at specific institutions. They want to collect artworks that have been legitimized by art history, so they're all buying into a consolidated cultural capital foundation. Whereas with stewardship, the best steward for an artwork really depends on the artwork, the community, and the issue. So it's not a system where we're inviting all the stewards to come to Biennial, for example. That's not going to happen, because there are going to be a lot of very different instances.

I'm working with an artist, who is exploring wildlife at the bottom of the oceans through AI and simulation environments. They want to partner with organizations that are doing environmental work around these issues. That's very different from another project that I have with an artist who is working with Argentinian Indigenous communities who are concerned with lithium exploitation in that area. The stewards of these projects are going to be very different people who are interested in different issues and are part of very different networks.

I guess my next glimmer will be when we successfully steward one of the first artworks, and I will get a bit of a better understanding as to whether this mechanism of re-localizing investment into art will actually work. To be completely honest with you, it could completely flop. But maybe not, because at the same time we would face a very cynical world if something like this would completely flop.

An important part of how PCO differs from the traditional art market model is that the traditional art market model is a globalized model and has incredibly high barriers to entry. It's very, very exclusive at the point of entry. It's very unclear how to enter into it. Whereas PCO is really meant to re-localize investment into art, because it's meant to speak to stewards who find a cause compelling and want to be part of that larger mission.

At the same time, the steward doesn't need to be someone who lives in the Caribbean. It can be somebody who, I don't know, spent their youth years there but is actually from Singapore. So it has a transnational, trans-jurisdictional possibility, as most technology-driven projects do nowadays, while still remaining true to a localized situated issue.

Ashley Hopkinson: What challenges are you facing around this work, and how do you overcome some of those challenges?

Victoria Ivanova: I've mentioned this question around stewards and the need to develop bespoke strategies for securing stewards for specific artworks. So it's the challenge of having to develop a system that wants generic, but when it comes to application is highly specialized and highly specific. Which creates a lot of overhead, to put it in economic terms, because you really need to invest into understanding a specific issue to a community.

Another issue I think is this question of, why should we use art as an instrument or some sort of vehicle for delving into an issue? Why isn't it just people who are passionate about that issue directly interfacing with it? Why have the workaround through art? That I think is a question as big as, why do art at all?

It's really in the eye of the beholder. Some people don't find it necessary to connect to the world through art as an interface. For others, it feels like an absolutely essential part of our human, post-human, extra-human journey. There is something about the impetus to create art, to use art as a communication vehicle, that has served us for millennia and will continue to serve us. But as our societies evolve, so should our understanding as of how this art is to be shared with each other and others.

The other question is just practical. Right now there aren't many organizations that support this type of work. That comes to the problem of art. In some ways artists are supported by an industry that doesn't really care for this type of work. On the other hand, a lot of organizations that care about the nature of the work don't really see art as an agent with it. So there's a bit of a no man's land in terms of supporting this work to the extent and for the duration that is necessary to nurture it into the world.

For now, we've been lucky, but it's a very bootstrapped kind of project. That's a significant gap at the moment. On the one hand there's all of these aspirations, but then when you go to these foundations that are into these aspirations, they're like, oh no, we don't support art.

Ashley Hopkinson: My final question is around AI. You have delved into it with a lot of curiosity.

Victoria Ivanova: Well, as part of the R&D platform we have a creative AI lab that's co-run by my colleague, Eva Jäger, a professor from King's College London. Around 2018, our team had already done a couple of machine learning related-based artistic commissions, collaborations with artists where the production process involved developing bespoke interfaces to machine learning backends. That process of working with the technology fairly early on, compared to the current model cycle, gave us a lot of insight into how there is a class of artists who are interested in the technical aspects of the technology, where they use these technological tools to plug into their larger production pipeline. So they're not input/output artists where you give prompts and you get a result. They have a pipeline, which is a methodology, which is an approach. AI is a component of it, and it transforms what they do and how they do it, but it isn't necessarily just an engine that spits out artworks. Even if sometimes it does, maybe they craft their own models.

At the moment we're working with the artists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, who are developing their own models. Once they've developed their own models, trained their own models, these models then generate artworks that are their artworks. But the model is also their artwork, right? So I guess what AI is forcing us to see is that we can't approach art at face value. It's not just a painting, it's not just a sculpture, it's also the method behind it. It's the rationale, the worldview behind it. Technology changes how that rationale plays out, but it doesn't substitute it. So I think that's what allows us to have this more exploratory approach to AI. And although there are a lot of issues with the technology, in terms of ownership, in terms of the bigger questions that raises around IP, once again around economic models—there's so many questions, but it's not really so black and white. I think this question of being made redundant as an artist by technology is really the wrong question. If one wants to take issue with AI, it's better to look at more granular things like, at what level of the AI training process does one want to take issue with it?

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you for taking time to talk.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.