After masterminding the tremendously successful and critically acclaimed documenta (13) in 2012, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev took a two-year hiatus from curating exhibitions and dedicated her time to teaching, giving a seminar on the creativity of bees, among other gigs. But the curator, who jokingly refers to herself as “WuDi”FFRQWUROOLHU FRXOGQ¶WVWDI ZD\IURP the art world for long.

In May this year, she was named artistic director of the 2015 Istanbul Biennial. Sleek rang Christov-Bakargiev to discuss her plans for the biennial and what it means to be the woman in charge.

SLEEK: Hi Carolyn. Where in the world are you today?
CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV: Oh, I’m just in Rome. I got back from Istanbul yesterday.

Why is the biennale entitled “Saltwater”?
Because it’s about waves and currents. For example, the different densities of salt in water produce underwater currents, so the title is both symbolic and literal.

The event will engage notions of how water is formed, the politics encircling it, and the way it moves and changes. One thing all organisms on earth have in common is that they need water and salt; without these two things there’d be no life. However, when people think of the water needed to sustain life, they don’t usually think of saltwater, which is actually the thing it most needs.

To what extent will the exhibition consider the region it’s in?
I’m interested in the role that art or culture can play in building and healing civic society. And this idea relates to those of my mentors from the left-wing Italian movement, Arte Povera, who were active in the Sixties and Seventies, and for whom art was not directly political in terms of its content, but in terms of its transformative potential.

The way in which I’m responding to Turkey as the host for the biennial is more nuanced; right now, with over 3 million refugees from Syria, it’s almost like Switzerland in World War Two. There are also the ongoing crises around the Black Sea and in the Middle East – as well as the country’s complex history as an amazing challenge and a great privilege, but I often have to rely on my friends, colleagues and associates for knowledge and guidance.

Who are your associates? And how does that translate into an exhibition?
People, things and books and ideas somehow come to me, like I’m a node in a network. This show has a very different structure from documenta (13), but what they share is that I always think in a form of chorality – a sense of togetherness. Through discussion, things
THE HIGH NUMBER OF WOMEN IN THE ART WORLD ISN’T NECESSARILY A VICTORY FOR FEMINISM

Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Wilson, Jane Bennett and Vandana Shiva who deal with eco-feminism as well as other issues. It seems to be something that’s closer to women right now. That’s great, but in terms of family relations, private relations and sexual relations, women in the West are paying for it. It also seems very hard for men to accept women who aren’t submissive, which is causing a withdrawal of the male in Western society.

change and transform. In DOCUMENTA (13) there were 13 agents who were named at the beginning and remained the same throughout, but with “Saltwater” it’s more like waves of people that echo each other and somehow accumulate. It just goes on and on like an organic process. It starts with people that I have long standing relationships with, like William Kentridge and Pierre Huyghe, Cevdet Erek and Füsun Onur, and keeps on growing. Every press release that comes out lists more alliances.

That sounds like an organic process that better reflects life, but also like an organisational challenge.

I slowly add alliances until at the end everybody is one. So it’s more like a progressive participant list. And they find me. I don’t really find them. You just listen to the world. I mean, how do you find your friends? How do you live your life? Some of it is just given because you end up with people seeking out similar interests. Griselda Pollock is a good example of this. She’s one of the founders of feminist art history, and was a huge influence on my thinking when I was at university. I never thought I’d meet her, but after DOCUMENTA (13) she invited me to take the Leverhulme professorship in Leeds. During this period we started thinking about how to combine the issues she’s been working on, such as trauma studies in art history and contemporary art, with my interests that go beyond the anthropocentric. Artic Povera taught me that the human is only one small part of the universe, which has been a position I’ve also worked from for years, and I still prefer to conceptualise the world as something beyond human intervention or agency. As a result of spending time with Griselda, it seemed natural that she would be one of the alliances when I started working on the Istanbul Biennial. She introduced me to the work of Elvan Zabunyan, who I think is fantastic, and who will be giving a reading entitled, “Unlearning. A Water Course and Course of Action.”

From what you’ve observed in the art world, do you think that the way of working, of mediating different components but also allowing them to take their own course, might be a way that women in the art world are more likely to operate? Talking about women in the art world is complicated, because often women are second in command and usually in a position subordinate to men. Therefore, the fact that there are so many women in the art world isn’t necessarily a victory for feminism. Of course it’s true that unlike the previous decades, today there are lots of great female artists and gallerists, so there has been some form of emancipation. On the other hand, the extent to which this has been allowed to happen because working in the art world is in keeping with the notion of “women’s work” – unlike working in finance or the military, fields