



WOMAN ON TOP

ART WORLD POWER PLAYER CAROLYN CHRISTOV- BAKARGIEV TALKS BIENNI- ALS AND THE NEW WOMAN'S WORK

INTERVIEW — Hili Perlson
PHOTOGRAPHY — Claudia Klein

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 “traffic controller”, couldn’t stay away from

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

there’s also a third factor; this mystery of the aesthetic, and the way art connects the particular with the universal. When you bring that into a zone where things seem stuck, the way art and culture can untie knots or participate in those processes is interesting to me, and is probably the reason why I’m involved in art. 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 biennale 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 to consider – particularly the Kurdish conflict – as well as the country’s complex history as part of the Ottoman Empire. To address these histories and situations is 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

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 Ereğ and Füsün 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. Arte 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 give a reading entitled, "Unlearning. A Water Course and Course of Action."

From what you've observed in the art world, do you think that this 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

dominated by men – is concerning. Also it's potentially really dangerous, because if that is what's happening, the importance art has will slowly diminish in correlation. That said, I

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

THE HIGH NUMBER OF WOMEN IN THE ART WORLD ISN'T NECESSARILY A VICTORY FOR FEMINISM

always try to be sceptical, and to try and understand the opposite of what I believe.

Do you think that if art is regarded as a feminine endeavour it runs the risk of being discredited as less important?

Not as a less important but as a gendered endeavour. It will mean a division of labour according to genders, where the women deal with arts, crafts and domestic affairs, and men control business and money. I'm not saying that's happening – I'm still seeing the position of women in the art world growing. But I always try to look at the other side of things, and zoom out to see if larger historical patterns match. Today, feminism is progressing but also diverging along emancipatory and conservative paths. I also notice, however, that there are a lot more women who deal with the crossover between science and art, too. So yes, there are academic figures like Bruno Latour who specialise in the latter field, but there are also others like

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.



To use your metaphor of waves, I feel like you have a strong impulse of going against the current.

Yes, of course!

Did going against the current affect your career in ways you can specify?

It's what other people call courage. Courage is nothing else than the ability to be in touch with one's emotions and follow them; etymologically it is derived from the Latin 'cors', 'the heart'. As a curator, you try not to think too far into the future. You think about the work you're involved in. You don't build an empire. You follow your heart. But so few people go against currents; they think they'll be swallowed up and die. It was very important for me right after the dOCUMENTA (13) to pull out of the art world and take two years off – I wanted to become completely invisible. In terms of Art Review's famous Power 100 list, I was hoping to go from number one to number zero but it didn't work. And I tried so hard! I didn't do any interviews, any big jobs, any exhibitions, all I did was teach. You have to be able to disappear and not be swallowed up. That has to do with negotiating things about knowledge capitalism and cognitive capitalism and withdrawing. My thinking is also connected with the libertarian-communist philosophy of Autonomia Operaia, an Italian leftist movement from the 1970s.

But power isn't always malignant or necessarily corrupting.

I agree. Basically, my work has the potential to transform the dominant paradigms of where we attribute value. Therefore, I can participate in the construction of the symbolic attribution of value by pushing things in one direction or another, through the invitation of this artist rather than that artist, or this text rather than that, and so on. My power isn't based on money, it's derived from my ability to alter the collective symbolic order.



MY POWER ISN'T ABOUT MONEY, IT'S ABOUT MY ABILITY TO ALTER THE SYMBOLIC ORDER