

Maria Lind

The artistic director  
of this year's Gwangju  
Biennale on what  
makes a good biennial,  
the importance  
of indeterminacy,  
teamwork, thorough  
thinking without  
utilitarianism, creating  
contact surfaces,



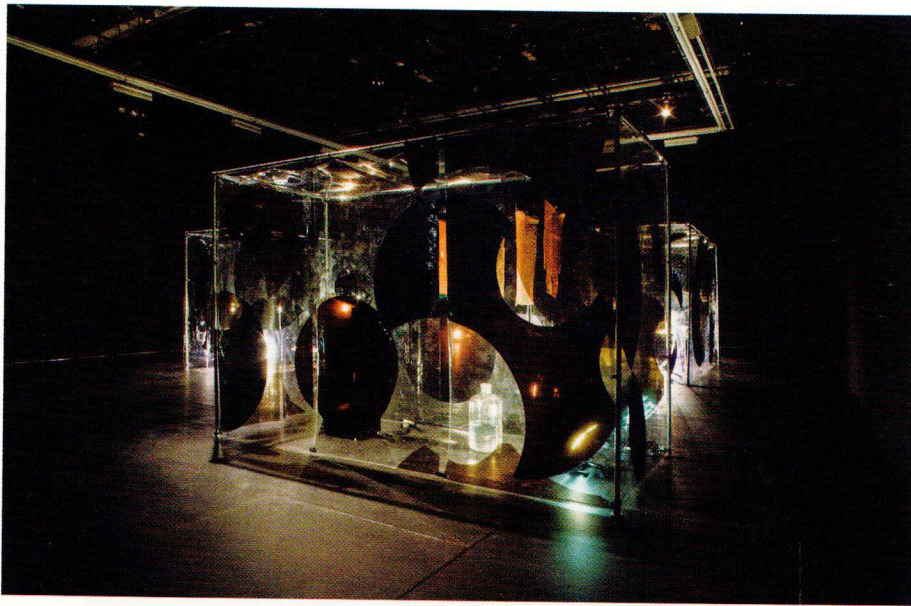
recognising that doing nothing is actually  
doing something, and her own methodology  
for getting all this biennial-organising  
business done...

Interview by

*Mark Rappolt*

*A curator and critic based in Sweden, Maria Lind is director of the Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, and artistic director of the 11th Gwangju Biennale (GB11), which is titled The Eighth Climate (What does art do)? and runs from 2 September to 6 November. She was previously director of the graduate programme at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson (2008–10), director of IASPIS in Stockholm (2005–7) and director of the Kunstverein München (2002–4). In 1998 she was cocurator of Manifesta 2 and in 2009 she won the Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. In addition, she has a regular column in ArtReview and contributes articles to a number of other newspapers and magazines. Her Selected Maria Lind Writing (2010) was published by Sternberg Press, and she is the editor of Abstraction (2013).*





INTERVIEW What do you think is the purpose of an art biennial? Is there some general purpose or does it differ from place to place and biennial to biennial?

ARIA LIND It differs from biennial to biennial, and over time. Among my highlights are the different editions of the Periferic in Iasi in the early 2000s, the 2013 Bienal do Mercosul in Porto Alegre and last year's Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg. The Periferic because it grew out of artist circles, had good timing with the artists they invited and managed to make a difference in the city. The Bienal do Mercosul is carefully curated by Sofia Hernández Chong by with a gentle process leading to excellent commissions and a beautifully installed show relating to contemporary concerns around the climate. The biennial in Ekaterinburg, with its embeddedness through, for example, production with local factories and grounding in the historical context. Among the big biennials, São Paulo stands out as one with a rich legacy both in terms of the exhibitions and how it connects to the city through a solid engagement with mediation.

Are there things about the history and location of Gwangju that affect how you approach the biennial? How do you keep in mind the context of Korea perhaps? How do you keep in mind the sense of a particular place and time in an event that is international and forward-looking?

The Gwangju Biennale was partly founded as a living memorial to the 1980 May 18 uprising, when the citizens of Gwangju demonstrated for

democratisation and against martial law. With the blessing of the military dictator [Major General Chun Doo-hwan] sent in the paratroops, who cracked down on civilians in extremely brutal ways, only to be pushed back by the citizens, who then held the city for several days until the final, excessively violent takeover by the military. During those days the city self-organised and functioned as an 1871 Paris Commune in miniature, giving rise to notions such as 'absolute community' and 'the Eros effect'.

This legacy is not only extremely interesting, but also humbling, connecting the biennale to the location in a special way. The city has gone through something remarkable, in addition to what has happened in general in the country, with the long period of dictatorship and struggles for labour rights in the midst of rapid economic development. Wanting to make a more 'embedded' biennial is related to this particular history of the biennale, which in turn grew directly out of the city's past. Not through a theme or the like, but a methodology.

The fact that Korea generally speaking is hierarchical, patriarchal and very formal has been motivational in terms of bringing in other

above Anicka Yi, *Fontenelle*, 2015, vinyl, steel pipes, motorcycle helmet, scent diffuser, glass container, water, kombucha scoby leather, nylon string, worklight, 310 × 198 × 127 cm. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

facing page Bernd Krauss, *PigmaM1*, 2015. Courtesy the artist

approaches and methods, which I and the curatorial team usually stand for and employ. Just one example: to have everybody on the curatorial team speak at the first press conference this year required a long and hard discussion with the Gwangju Biennale Foundation; now it is accepted that this is the way we do it. I was fortunate enough to be able to invite curator Binna Choi and assistant curators Azar Mahmoudian, Margarida Mendes and Michelle Wong, and we eventually asked the local art collective Mite-Ugro to join us as local curatorial associates. As well as differences, we share experiences from self-organisation and mediation.

AR Could you briefly go over the concept for the biennial and how the artists were selected? What do you mean by *The Eighth Climate*? And given that there is an implicit connection with an issue such as climate change here, what can art do about that?

ML *The Eighth Climate* (What does art do?) is not a 'theme' or a 'concept', but rather indicates a set of parameters for GB11. It is about placing art centre-stage, art's capacity to always say something about the future, connect dots over small and big distances, its embeddedness in particular situations, and their mediation. What happens if we try to tease out more of the artworks in this eclectic, kaleidoscopic and puzzling adventure? What happens if we accept their invitation to engage, and take their interpellation more at face value? One of the things that we might end up doing is to enter a dance



of futurity where the past is neither completely forgotten nor a guiding light. In this sense, GB11 is a temperature check of art today. A number of works in GB11 pertain to the dire conditions of the planet, including temperature change and other factors affecting the climate, as well as natural resources and land rights. Take for example Alma Heikkilä's seductive series of large paintings, *Things that are massively distributed in time and space* (2016), where, in these airy closeups of molecular matter, all material agents (water, pigment, etc) are quoted as coauthors, echoing disputes over visibility and the metabolism of everyday life. Or Pratchaya Phinthong's modest photo series of a small dark puddle that is burning – it is gas hydrate, which is a potential future replacement for oil. Fernando García-Dory is making a new work in and around the last rice field in Gwangju, developing a play, *The Lament of the Newt*, about the location and its past and future, food production and rapid gentrification, together with inhabitants in the nearby area. The play will be performed at the rice field.

The curatorial team went on a first site visit in September of 2015, together with a dozen artists – strong and relevant practices – who were invited to make new work. We encouraged them to think about local production in terms of materials, techniques, skills, etc, rather than making straightforward site-specific or context-sensitive work. Another dozen were invited in a similar manner during the winter, and the oeuvres, practices and methodologies of the first group of invited artists indicated the direction of the exhibition. Eventually several methodological and thematic strands were noticed and developed. Subsequently, another 70-odd artists have been invited to show existing work, which emphasises and complicates the various strands. Many of the art projects pertain to more than one strand, which hints at possible readings of works rather than aiming at firmly framing them. The strands include 'above and below ground', 'right to opacity', 'the image people' and 'new subjectivities'.

For example, siren eun young jung's intriguing video *Act of Affect* (2013) pertains to 'new subjectivities' as well as 'the right to opacity', in terms of how gender is performed beyond norms and how the condition of illegibility is necessary for certain kinds of self-determination. The video is part of her long-term research on the Korean theatre tradition of *gukgeuk*, a type of vaudeville performance in which all roles are played by women actors, who consequently formed tightly knit communities. *Gukgeuk* was particularly popular during the Korean War, and siren's project highlights how the tradition is carried on from generation to generation, until today.

GB11 can also be seen as a constellation of many parts happening over one year, starting

in January 2016. Thinking thoroughly about what art does – without necessarily implying a utilitarian approach – how it lands in different contexts, and how it sits in society and creates ripples on the water, GB11 comprises 'Monthly Gatherings', or *Wol-rae-hoe*, made together with Mite-Ugro; an 'Infra-School' in Gwangju, Seoul and beyond; around 100 national and international biennale fellows; a forum with the fellows; two publications; a blog; and an exhibition that stretches from the Gwangju Biennale building to other venues and places in the city, including Asia Culture Center and the 5.18 Archives, and online. The new commission by Metahaven, *Information Skies*, can only be viewed online.

AR How will the *Infra-School* work within the framework of the biennale? And what role do you think education plays in the mission of a curator (in general)?

ML Together with the Monthly Gatherings, *Infra-School* is about using what is already there. Instead of setting up an education arm of GB11, we opted for collaborating with existing educational institutions, where we plug in GB11

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artists and the curatorial team, doing lectures, seminars, workshops, crits, etc. Our partners range from Seoul National University and the self-organised RAT school of art in Seoul to Gwangju's Chosun University and the Gwangju International Center. It is a very simple and rewarding way of setting up situations of exchange between residents and visitors. A common denominator for those moments of exchange is to talk about art, about specific works and practices.

Both the Monthly Gatherings and the *Infra-School* are integral and seminal to GB11, being intensive moments of interaction about artworks, creating contact surfaces with people who have shared concerns. In and of itself, this gets the biennale outside its usual confinements, and helps create a sense of embeddedness. There are certainly limits to embeddedness, as Hito Steyerl has pointed out: the closer the embedded journalists got to the actual fighting in the Iraq War, the blurrier the images became. You can lose sharpness by being too close, but I don't think we have reached that point with GB11!

It is hard to talk for other curators. I have practised a kind of triangulation since the early 1990s: curating, writing and teaching. None of them can survive without the other. This being said, within my work as director of Te Konsthall, what you mention as 'education' goes under the rubric of mediation. This implies trying to identify and create contact surfaces based on shared concerns, between particular artworks and projects and people, whether individuals or groups. It is an art-centric approach which has turned out to work really well in Tensta. We are borrowing some of this for the mediation activities of GB11 too.

AR Do you approach the biennial with an idea about what art can do or is the biennial a testing ground for the question? And, perhaps more fundamentally, why should it do anything? How is art defined in this context?

ML We do both: there is an idea that is there to be revised and reformulated through the process of making the biennale. Any project needs to have a certain indeterminacy, ending up being somehow different from what you anticipated – otherwise it is a desk product. Everything does something – a stone, a book, a star and an artwork – and I am interested in what art does. In this case it is molecular in the sense that it is about the individual artworks, and what happens when they sit next to each other in physical space, more than the category of art.

Seemingly doing nothing is also doing something. Think of the work of Bernd Krause who is showing in a small private museum near the Gwangju landmark the Mudeungsan Mountain. His practice is a great example of an ingenious avoidance of given categories and frameworks, always teasing out something unexpected and yet pertaining to what art work is, ranging from the amateur to the professional. He has also made it part of his practice to use what exists in his immediate surroundings, quite literally, and often to spend a lot of time in the exhibition space continuing work after the opening.

It is the institutional model that is at play here: art is that which is made within the framework of the sphere of art and by people identified as artists.

AR Is there a message that you want people to take away from a visit to the biennial?

ML That spending time with art can be incredibly exciting, mind-blowing. And that artworks do these things in radically different ways. It is not about art for art's sake but about art itself. And that it is possible to make a major art event with limited presence of the commercial art market. A minority of the artists in GB11 operate within that circuit.



R As I understand it, the biennial theme has one  
m of investigating art's potential agency in terms  
imagining a future in a manner that's perhaps less  
dictated by prevailing ideologies. Is there a risk that  
such speculation, taking place in the context of an  
art biennial, has a diminished agency because of the  
structures of both 'art' (in the sense of a relatively free  
and 'unreal' zone) and a 'biennial' (in the sense of  
a festival that occurs over a fixed period of time and  
then expires – and is safe because of that)?

L Sure, the resonance is very  
limited, if you compare it to using  
other formats and media, and  
certainly very temporary, with the  
exception of certain works that  
might live on after the closing  
of GB11. However, strong and  
relevant art tends to be agile and  
low-burning, and dispersed, so  
there are other modus operandi  
and criteria of assessment. And  
the artworks will have lives after  
GB11, in many different parts of

the world. The risk of the perpetual indeterminacy of contemporary art is there too, but I believe that the works in question here convey their own commitment.

For me, this biennial is a giant amplifier weighed against what is usually at my disposal – I have primarily worked with small structures in relative peripheries. It actually feels 'big'! To do this in Gwangju, where many inhabitants have a feeling of ownership of the biennale, is exciting.

AR There's a sense in both the artists selected and the theme itself of gathering together disparate themes and ideas. Do you think that there's a strength in the sense that art can draw a little from every trade or culture, while not necessarily being expert or embedded in any? That it can allow for a mobility of thinking because of this, that other structures or disciplines eschew?

ML Art can do both: be deeply entrenched in something and use the smorgasbord model.

Its ultimate strength comes from it being a metacategory, encompassing everything else: philosophy, science, politics, psychology, the other arts, etc. You describe it as mobility of thinking – I don't know anything in contemporary life and existence that has this capacity, to this degree. Art is unruly, and undisciplined, at the same time as it can be sharp and precise.



Ann Lislegaard, *Oracles, Owls... Some Animals Never Sleep* (still), 2012–13, two-channel 3D animation, sound, 12 min 48 sec. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam; and Murray Guy Gallery, New York