

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV IN THE HERE AND NOW

INTERVIEW KAREN WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHS OLIVER MARK

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV is the artistic director of documenta (13), which opens in June 2012. She will be the second woman, and sole Italian/American citizen, to curate this prestigious event. Prior to this, she was the director of the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, having been the chief curator there from 2002 until 2008.

Carolyn was born in New Jersey in the United States. Her mother was Italian and her father was a Bulgarian refugee who met her mother, an archaeologist, while studying medicine in Torino. Carolyn initially planned to follow in her mother's footsteps and study archaeology but she finally settled on contemporary studies at the University of Pisa where she completed her thesis on Frank O'Hara's poetry in relation to Jackson Pollock.

She has written widely on contemporary art as a reporter for Italian newspapers and international art journals, and, more recently, about the Arte Povera movement, on which she has also published a book, and has published the first monographs on Janet Cardiff and William Kentridge.

KAREN WRIGHT How did you start your career?

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV My first job right after university was with a newspaper called *Reporter*. They did not have an art critic so I literally knocked on the door and said "I think you need art, you cannot live without art writing and I will do the reviews." So the editor asked me to write an article about Artemisia Gentileschi. I said "Sure, I'll do that." I wrote it in 24 hours, including all my feminist impulses and her hatred of the father. He hired me, it was my first job and it was 800,000 lire a month – nothing! I spent half of it on train tickets going to



Carolyn Christov Bakargiev photographed on 11 July 2011 in Kassel, Germany

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exhibitions because they would not pay my expenses and I went all around the country and that's when I really started my education. I went to Mario Pieroni's gallery, and Maria Colao's gallery, Primo Piano in Rome and that was my education because on those two sofas I met Lawrence Weiner, Joan Jonas, Robert Barry, Mario Merz and Roman Opalka among many others. Everybody who came to Rome would be sitting on one or the other of those two sofas. It was very simple. So I met them all and interviewed them and learned art from them and that's when you understand that artists are not isolated in a white cube at all. So my approach has always been to start with the artist and treat the work of art as a consequence, a by-product of conversations or thoughts.

When you go out to dinner with artists, you realize they don't want to be with other artists necessarily, they also want to be around people who are doing other things – Mario Merz would go out to dinner with artists but was interested in all sorts of subjects, like zoology, poetry, biology, and so on.

KW How does this approach affect your curating? Do you pull artists and people from other walks of life together?

CCB I do not believe in the interdisciplinary, it is usually a recipe for failure because it is not specific enough. But I am interested in somehow reinventing the art exhibition, in a more open way, open also to other non-artistic fields because, to be honest, I think it is a bit lost in the hyper-specialization of looking only at art. People are too connected with people from the same field, they have no time for people from other fields, so you get into this autism of the art community and it doesn't help anybody. I am really not interested in relationships between high and low or breaking the boundaries between art and life, which was a 20th-century obsession that I don't find relevant right now. But I am interested in an alliance of brains and the art exhibition being a place where this can happen. I am not at all a detached intellectual in academia. I work closely with artists and they have been more of a school for me than university. I am thinking of the Arte Povera artists – Alighiero Boetti was a close friend, Mario Merz was a very close friend, Michelangelo Pistoletto was an influential person on me. Lawrence Weiner too – I have a notebook by him.

KW I love Lawrence Weiner.

CCB I know, he's great. Lawrence has been in every group show I've done. I don't know if you've noticed that. For me he is like the ultimate witness and legitimizes it all. With him being here, I feel it's a contemporary art project, I just do this and I've always done that. When I landed in New York the first thing I did if you remember was to put a work of his in PS1. It was about time, wasn't it?

KW Tell me about your work for documenta. I am keen to know more about the '100 Notes – 100 Thoughts' project. I gather they form a kind of prelude to documenta. So is documenta a sum of these notebooks, maybe?



Jimmie Durham poses as an apple tree, Auerpark Kassel, April 2011

ideas today. Pierre Huyghe is on my Advisory Committee and you know his earlier works were all about no knowledge zones, and from a banal sociological point of view you can say that we are at a time of cognitive capitalism, or knowledge capitalism, where the products of the 21st century are mainly products of the brain.

KW Moving away from the object into something more...

CCB No, I am not talking about art yet. I am not even talking about ideas. I am just saying that we are in a historical period in which the historical, technological and social system is being built around products of the brain in the same way that it was built around the products of machines in the 19th and 20th centuries, and around products of the land prior to that. The economy revolves around the products of the brain, whether it is a software programme, or in the creative work of a search for quantum mechanics. It is in the biological lab, or wherever, [that] most of the economy is now developing ... it's not most of the economy, but it's the drive, the motor of the economy. The political agency is not of the class of labourers but is now that of the intellectual labourers, and that includes artists; therefore, it is in the same way that the 19th century was the era of industrial machines and the class of people who had political agency – or didn't – was that of the labourers of the factories, even though they were obviously still peasants and farmers. It doesn't go away, it just means that those are not the people that have a...

KW Political shift of importance.

CCB The power to make society. In an advanced digital age, the dangerous fact is that companies such as Google control power and this goes against freedom, so a non-concept can mean a strike of the intellectuals against this control over their brains.

KW Are the notebooks all commissioned?

CCB Yes, of course. A notebook is not a diary, it is a place where you annotate things, where you take notes from a lecture or from a book you are reading and you are doing it for the purpose of using it later. It's not a 'now' of elaborated knowledge, it is a 'let me keep this and I might use it

Jimmie Durham: photo by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev



Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in front of Giuseppe Penone's Idee di Pietra (Ideas of Stone), inaugurated on 21 June 2010, in Kassel's Auepark, as the first artwork of documenta (13)



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later' and many times you don't even go back to it when you write. So the notebook is a sign of attention, it is somewhere to focus, it means that whatever you are doing is important and that you are listening. So to use a notebook is an exercise in solving the problem of ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder – which is the disease of our time of overflowing information. The notebook is to thinking and writing as dance is to moving or walking; it is an intentional, choreographed application of yourself to learn how to be embodied and disembodied. A dance both embodies you and dislocates you because you are in a sphere of music or of rhythm and color just as you are rooted in the here and now. The notebook is a lot like that because you are disconnected at the same time as you are in the here and now taking notes.

KW So do the notebooks become a record of the here and now?

CCB You mean the question of the archive, yes, the notebooks build an archive. When you have a hundred of them, you build an archive of thoughts and ideas. Everybody's dealing with how to manage archives right now, they are dealing with how to digitalize archives, how to map them, how to use archives and start them from scratch. And it's not from the past, it's now. But the notebooks are an archive that does not exist and they don't make sense as an archive because an archive usually makes connections within it, but why on earth would you put Lukács and Jodorowsky in the same archive? It makes no sense.

KW There is a big gap between each documenta, which gives you the luxury of time but also gives you the opportunity to get people excited and to tease people. For this documenta, you've already installed a Penone sculpture?

CCB Yes, we have done a few things. The Penone sculpture was installed at Summer Solstice last year and this year we showed Pierre [Huyghe]'s film on Valentine's day. You have to create pockets of space and time and you do it often by distracting, by creating a diversion. And it's also for the artists. For example, if you look at the video of the ceremony of the planting, there is a Javier Tellis artwork at the end of it, after 17 minutes that almost nobody has watched because who would watch a film where all you see is the Mayor of Kassel talking, talking, talking. If you look at the people that were there, you'd see that at least 25 of the hundred artists were there. I did that on purpose, I staged it so that there were people involved in documenta there, so in a way we actually did the documenta already, every moment of it, the installation of the work, the presentation of the work, the press release, the reviews, we even have the articles on the whole thing, the dinner party, it's all done and finished.

KW I understand there is archaeology as well?

CCB The artist Horst Hoheisel is known for his Holocaust memorial artworks because of the piece he did in Kassel in 1987 – there was a fountain called the Aschrott Fountain, which was destroyed by the Nazis in '38, so he proposed to make the same fountain shape but as a cast underground. Walter De Maria's *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* [1977] in Kassel may have influenced him; it's a kind of post-documenta piece in which an iron plate on the ground is always at body temperature, even when it is snowing.

KW There is a kind of continuity there.

CCB It's a kind of entanglement. The fountain has a neo-gothic shape and it gets really dirty down there. Hoheisel has a contract with the city as a street cleaner and his only task is to clean his own artwork once a month.



Top: Walter De Maria, *The Vertical Earth Kilometer*, 1977, Kassel, Germany;
above: documenta (13) agents and advisors in front of the Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, 2009: (left to right) Rene Gabri, Joasia Krysa, Sunjung Kim, Livia Paldi, Hetti Perkins, Kitty Scott, Andrea Viliani, Chus Martinez, Ayreen Anastas, Raimundas Malasauskas, Koyo Kouoh, Pierre Huyghe, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Eva Scharrer, Sofia Hernandez and Marta Kuzma

Every year since 1987 his contract has been renewed. I asked him who's going to do it when he's dead and he said, "I don't know, maybe my children will," so there is this strange story of this artist-labourer who is cleaning this artwork which is a hole in time. To give the work visibility, we did the fountain cleaning publicly in March, like a performance. It connects to the history of feminist performance. Susan Hiller was there. I try to tie in these things in a way, that's all I do.

KW So who's participating this time?

CCB I can't tell you that but there are a lot of artists who are not discoveries, there are a lot of artists who never were in documenta. You know documenta has been important in opening up the field of art to non-eurocentric practices, in a worldly fashion, ever since Catherine David and Okwui Enwezor, and therefore there are a number of Western artists of the 90s who have not exhibited. I am continuing the worldly nature of the exhibition while also including some artists who were skipped. So there is a bit of healing going on in my show.

KW I like the word 'healing', as opposed to 'amnesia' or 'rediscovery'. It is also something that you have done throughout your career.

CCB There will be names that are very normal in the sense that there are simply artists from the 90s. I know there will be some criticism from people saying "Oh God, that's such an obvious list," but the point is that on one hand there is the healing of this missing generation and on the other there is what they do and how they work together in this project. So from my point of view it is okay. There are also historical artists who are less known and, yes, there are young discoveries – there is something for everyone. But for me, it is not the artist list, I am interested in the procedures. No artist does a site visit on their own, never. I always bring together ten, fifteen artists at the same time and I do that on purpose, because they don't know each other. I introduce them and they spend days and days together and this has consequences and that doesn't happen normally any more in the art world.

KW But even that wasn't more about conversation than...

CCB But at least they spent time together. Most exhibitions are not like that, they are done by committees of curators and you get this invitation and you send the work and you install the work and you see it at the opening. I see it as a laboratory, a kind of experiment in creating relations between artists and people from different non-art fields such as quantum physics and others which in my view are very close to art. So the result, if one is looking for a big exhibition with lots of great artworks plainly juxtaposed in a line, with a kind of art fair feeling, then this documenta might not provide that because I am trying to pull back the space of the group exhibition and create a space that belongs to the artist and not to the art world. The art world are just visitors who can take a peek.

KW It seems to me that your work and what you speak about, what engages you, reflects an interest in how things change over time and how we perceive those changes.

CCB I don't know if it is for other people but for me the most important thing is playing with time. Creating past perfects and future perfects, I fool around with time, like for example one of my first acts when I was still at Castello di Rivoli was to organise a seminar about the past documentas. I invited everybody alive, like Roger Buerger, Okwui, Catherine [David], Jan Hoet and Rudi Fuchs. Harald Szeeman had died of course, so Jean-Christophe Ammann who was on his team came, and Arnold Bode was dead also so a student of his came. I think it was the first time that we were all together in the same room. It was in September 2009.

KW And what was the discussion about?

CCB It was a look at the past documentas. It was about creating an occasion where different historical moments can meet, where they can *really* meet, not just in the sense that someone makes an anthology. They were actually physically meeting and talking to each other and it seemed absurd, so it was more of a surrealist act. But in reality it is a decoy as well as a seriously interesting conference. We had lectures in the public realm by the past artistic directors and then there was a series of private meetings with the agents of documenta which weren't announced publicly, but they were very formal, and out of these came the whole concept of documenta.

KW So, are you exploring new venues?

CCB Yes. There will be a lot of new works, I'm not sure there'll be only

artworks. I say this because I'm not sure how long the definition of the field of contemporary art will exist. In other words, I think art has always existed but it changes its definition through the centuries. So I am going to think about the world, about how knowledge is constructed and in this particular moment in time, if I am interested in abstraction or if I am investigating the artwork itself as an artwork and that in itself is a very recent idea, it is only three centuries old, as old as parliamentary democracy which is a political system that has lasted a couple of hundred years and might not last forever. Why would it? No political system has lasted so long. I think we are still living in this period where contemporary art exists but we might be at the end of it and entering a new period where the fields of human culture are defined differently. It doesn't mean that artworks do not exist it just means that they participate in the world under a different heading, or a different definition. ■

documenta (13) runs from 9 June to 16 September 2012 in Kassel, Germany



From top: Horst Hoheisel, *Negative Form*, 1987;
Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Horst Hoheisel
with photographs of the Aschrott Fountain in Kassel
before and after it was destroyed by Nazi troops in 1939;
cleaning *Negative Form*, 29 March 2011

Vertical Earth Kilometer; Group photo: Chiara Vecchiarelli, courtesy documenta and Museum Fridericianum, GmbH

Hoheisel, *Negative Form*: photo by the artist; Aschrott Fountain: photo Dirk Schwarze, courtesy documenta and Museum Fridericianum, GmbH