

## *When art becomes very popular it loses a kind of freedom*

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Svetla Petkova

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### **- What were your expectations prior to the Biennale of Sydney and how do you evaluate the process now, after its end?**

- I was surprised by the incredible success on the level of audience and critical response. I was surprised very positively. There were about 400000 visitors, which is 100000 more than the

Venice biennale and it's a very small country from the point of view of the population.

Australia has 20 million people. I didn't expect such a large audience and also the quality of some critical responses was very high. I didn't know how intellectual the Australian community was before doing the biennale. In terms of the exhibition I thought that it would be very difficult to do a biennale today because there are so many biennales in the world and we are in the moment when there is so much art market. The art fairs are trying to look like biennales more and more. I was addressing the project with the intention of reacting to that and changing the way we make a biennale. To move away from this mixture of art market and art exhibition.

### **- In an announcement of yours you talk about the "biennale syndrome", about visiting the exhibition venues like going to the supermarket and all this as a consequence of consumer culture . What is the difference between other biennales and this last Biennale in Sidney?**

- It's not a supermarket. I think the problem in the world right now is consumer culture. It's not a problem of the East or the West. It's a problem on a global level because people are not very happy and the reason why one lives is to achieve and experience happiness. The reason why one lives is not just consuming. Consuming is fine, it's also a part of life, but it's not an intellectual and sensual space of life. It's not a space of cultural production at all. The biennale was very different from normal biennales, mainly because I did not include only young artists. I think this idea of the biennale as a place to see the most advanced research of the youngest and newest artists is not possible anymore because it repeats a model of packaging the new products of consumer culture. It used to be a good model but it's not a

good model anymore. And I don't think that the artists like it. I don't believe really that there is such a difference between the past and the present. Everything that exists in the world is contemporary, whether it was made 2000 years ago or today. It's so contemporary if you look at the question from a philosophical point of view. Artists today make works in relation or in reaction, or in connection with their daily life and their daily life is made of very old things and very new things. We don't read only the latest novel. We read Shakespeare and the latest novel. The first thing I did was to create an exhibition which was a group of many, many exhibitions like many constellations of stars in sky. Each of these constellations had works from the past and new works made today and the artists knew this when they were working and making the new works. They knew about some of the historical works in the show. Their new work was somehow in dialog. That is the first and most evident difference with other biennales. Another difference is that there are a lot of secret projects and hidden projects that are not visible and that were not written about in the general press. For example Liam Gillick. He transformed a public lecture into private performance of many one to one lectures. He was giving a lecture over e-mail to every person who had reserved a place in the public conference. This is an example of a project which was not visible, which was like a parallel to the exhibition and quite a secret in a way from being a consumed by the media. It was working in a groups of two or three not in the public space of the museum. I think that such projects can be done only in contexts like biennale. These cannot be done in art fairs. It makes no sense in terms of the art market. It is really about returning to in a way to the ideas of Adorno and the ideas of how one can have intellectuality survive in a historical moment of crisis of intellectuality.

**- The idea for the online venue is very important, I think. Many people don't have the possibility to travel to the exhibitions and in this case they got the chance to be part of the process. What were the comments regarding it?**

- First of all I think it was a great success. The online venue is the first online venue that was ever made for a biennale. It is revolutionary because websites usually are used for documentation or information. Sydney (and Australia) is very far. Not just far from Europe. It is also far from Asia, from China, from India, far from Japan. So, I thought it was very important that one of the museums, one of the venues could be the digital one, the Internet. That was the first space of the biennale which opened and there were very good projects. Also the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov did a project in the online venue which was a waiting

room in a Second Life. Many of the projects of the online venue were interesting because they challenged the idea of digital art, paradoxically, against what you are supposed to do on Internet as Internet art. For example a waiting room where nothing happens is certainly not what one thinks in turns of the Internet where so much always happens.

**- The theme of your Biennale of Sydney is “Revolutions – Forms that turn”. What did the Biennale turn “upside down” as you have written in the text of yours?**

- It turned upside down a lot of the things we already mentioned. For example the importance given to the website compared to the physical exhibition is a turning upside down. For example the fact of putting Duchamp bicycle wheel and other historical works in the exhibition is turning upside down a contemporary art exhibition model. There were even some works from the late 1700's in the biennale by Thomas Bock and he was the first Australian artist in the sense European descent. He was sent as a prisoner to Australia because he helped a women to have an abortion, but because he was an artist and he was the only one who knew how to print, he had to make money for the colony. I found that very interesting, ironic, and turning upside down what one considers proper and legal in a society making the money, but was also being a convict. There are many, many things that were revolutionised, I think. But the most important thing was the recovery of the word itself. The word “revolution” is against old fashion right now because the only things revolutionary are Nike shoes or Blackberry devices and any other use of the word such as a poetical usage is considered anachronistic and old fashioned and wrong. You know like something from a distant past like the Russian revolution or something. And nobody really uses the word. I mean it is considered a word that is exhausted and a concept that has been exhausted. I think that something very important was to turn to the impulse to revolt. And the impulse to revolt is what is interesting to me. The impulse to break something. The impulse to create, the impulse which is in the idea of destruction. It is something without which children cannot develop psychologically. It is very important and I think our culture is dominated by fear and by control. And the notion of controlling everything now is controlling through the market. From a psychoanalytical perspective it is very unhealthy. One of the biggest points was to resemantize, to reengage the notion of revolt. Which is a feminist notion because *vulva* in Latin which means the uterus has the same etymology as *volvere* which is “to turn”. Because the fetus turns in a uterus, “revolt” is to turn and turn again. Strangely enough revolution is actually synonymous with feminist practice. I find these interesting etymologies of the word

important and what I did in the exhibition was to make a show called *Revolutions* about the word itself. The viewer expects to go in and see a lot of political work, a lot of work which refers to contemporary revolutions or revolutions which should exist maybe or which could exist in the society and when you were in exhibition however your expectation was contradicted. In the experience of the viewer there was a contradiction because what you become confronted with were many works that had to do with turning, with the form of turning. Turning something upside down, rotating, rewinding from cinematic point of view. Repeating something which is repeated over and over. The exhibition was actually very much a formalist exhibition about exploration of form and turning from the point of view of form. So this made the entire exhibition like a revolution of the expectations of the viewer because now it is very fashionable to do exhibitions, biennales about direct political content, of social content and my point of view is that this is also belonging to consumer culture. It is something like watching CNN on TV or Al Jazeera or anything. It's a contemporary obsession with politics which are actually not politics, they are like a simulation of politics. So many times exhibitions which use this theses actually are doing the opposite because every revolution is a personal revolution and it is a psychoanalytic revolution and it is an interior revolution. So, you can only have a social revolution if you have an intimate private revolution first. I wanted to go to the basics of the phenomenology of perception.

**- What in your opinion is artistic revolution and can we talk about revolutionary forms in art today?**

- Of course. We can always talk about revolutionary forms of art. I'm not a postmodernist. Revolutionary art simply means art that changes your idea of what art can be. For example the ready made – Duchamp's ready made or Malevich when he created the *Black square*. It completely changes your idea of what art is and can be. So, today we are in a revolutionary moment both because of the digital age, Internet which will and does change our idea of what art is and also because of globalization. So we must redefine art, because there are so many different cultures and so many different simultaneous histories in the world that the Western idea or European idea of what art is can no longer be used. We encounter when speak about Australia, Aboriginal philosophy and Aboriginal art. There must be a new definition of what art is because the idea and social function of art in Aboriginal society was and is very different. For example there is no notion of an autonomous artwork and this idea of autonomy of the artwork, which is an idea of Winckelmann and of the moment of the rise of the

bourgeoisie in the late 1700s, is not possible anymore today in same way it was. So, of course, there is revolutionary art. All art that reinvents what art means is revolutionary. I think more than being in a revolutionary period, we are in a “pre-revolutionary” period. The exhibition was trying to think about what it means to be in a pre-revolutionary period. The world reminds me of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It reminds me of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. So, it reminds me of very particular moments in history that were pre-revolutionary, and usually these periods are periods with very strong technological innovation and scientific discovery and change, they are also moments of economic growth, but they usually are just before a kind of collapse, when you need to reinvent a political system. The political systems in the world today are all very old. Whether it’s the old socialist system or it’s the old parliamentary democracy system of western liberalisms. All of the systems are very old and I don’t know, I’m not sure if they correspond to the technological level and technological revolution of our time. Generally when there is scientific and technological change, there is a new political system like what it happened in the Renaissance etc. So, I would say that in pre-revolutionary periods, art plays a very important role. Art always experiments with subjectivity, experiments with perception, with knowledge. You know how knowledge is processed and is constructed in a mind. So, that’s the field I work in, I’m not in politics, I’m in art because I think art is always a space of prototypes and the problem is always when artistic revolution or cultural revolution becomes institutionalized and loses its potential for change. Usually the artists are put aside and they either commits suicide or are killed or they are forgotten and the power becomes institutionalized. That’s when there is a new separation, but generally at the beginning of revolutionary periods, even if you think of the Paris Comune, there was Édouard Manet. He was on the barricades. Now is maybe an interesting moment of pre-revolution in art and I’m interested in creating spaces, exhibition projects in spaces where the artists and writers and thinkers can experiment with this notion. I know that in the East even more than in the west of Europe the word revolution is kind of very old fashioned, because of what happened in 20<sup>th</sup> century, but one must look not just at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but at thousands of years of human life.

**- It is very interesting that in the exhibition you put together old and new art works as well as newly commissioned ones. Could you specify the main points of the exhibition? -**  
There were no sections. There were some main projects. Because you are Bulgarian, I could mention Nedko Solakov. In this case, Nedko made another new origin of the work he had

already made many times and that he will continue to make his whole life. This particular work was called *A World (black and white)*. The artist has painters, like house painters, paint the room white and then paint the room black and then paint the room white and then paint the room black and then paint the room white and then paint the room black... Over and over and over again for three months of the exhibition. It is of course a paradox and it is of course humorous. One expects the painter in an exhibition to be a painter of paintings, not a painter of walls. So, there is a kind of humorous joke in the work but there is also a formal aspect, a circle because the house painters who paint walls are making a “circle” everyday from morning to evening during the time of the exhibition, a loop. So it is revolutionary in a very literal sense, but it is also about repetition of an artwork. So an artist who makes a work over and over maybe his whole life is against consumer culture because he is not making something different from what he made before. Indeed the Tate Modern bought this work after this exhibition of Sydney. It is widely recognized as Nedko’s most important piece and it is a piece he did in Moscow and a piece he did in Venice. So, again it’s like the work circulating in a world and is being repeated over and over. That was done however in Sydney in a much more spectacular way than ever before because it was at the entrance lobby of the museum – the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was the first work the audience saw and it immediately made you feel that the Biennale was not finished to be prepared. Like the day of the vernissage, the day of the opening one expects the biennale to not be ready, unfinished. That’s normal, you know, when you go to biennales, but in the second day and in the third, and in the fourth, and in the last – every single day of the entire exhibition it looked like the biennale was not finished yet, was not ready yet. That was an important piece. But I can tell you that perhaps one of the most important works of the biennale was done by the French artist Pierre Huyghe. It was a major project which was funded by the Ellipse Foundation in Portugal. Pierre wanted to make a tropical forest inside the Concert hall of the Opera House. It is something almost impossible because we had to remove eight hundred chairs and bring two thousand trees and smoke machines and huge lights to make a science fiction atmosphere. And then in this forest of lines, it was called “Forest of Lines”, a singer, would walk in the paths with her guitar, just an acoustic guitar, playing a song which Pierre wrote and Laura Marling – a young, very, very new folk singer from London made the music for it and this song was telling the story of how to get out of the Concert hall, of the SYdney Opera House and how to get out city and how to go up the North coast and how to go to a forest in

Queensland and how to reach a woman and ask this woman “where it all began”. It was a very poetic installation about spectacle in the home of spectacle because, you know, the Sydney Opera House is the most important, and iconic building of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, he choose the most iconic building of 20<sup>th</sup> century which is the building used for spectacle and this spectacle is however a spectacle which reverses the idea of spectacle because this was not a “representation” of trees. This was a *real* forest. You smelled the trees and the earth inside and it carried you away, escaping the spectacle. Also this project only lasted 24 hours. That’s another the revolutionary aspect. Well it’s normal to do performances in a biennale but it is not normal to make the most expensive project of the biennale last 24 hours. That’s not normal. And on top of it only a hundred people at a time. Only a 6500 people of the 400000 who saw the biennale really saw this Pierre Huyghe piece because with the limit of 100 people per moment they were very long waiting lines outside, very long lines. But even with people who were waiting, they couldn’t get in because, you know, if each persons stayed 15 minutes, and you have only 24 hours and you have a limit of a 100 people at a time for security reasons, then it means that it becomes very like a rare experience. But the people really wanted to see, they came in the middle of the night, they came in moments when the line was not so long. It was also free, so it was of course a very democratic moment. Normally you have to pay a lot of money to go to the Sydney Opera House for a concert or so. It was important for me that it was free. I think that it was one of the most important projects of the Biennale. Also beautiful work by South African artist William Kentridge which was about Gogol’s Nose thinking about the absurdity of today. Another major work was of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Together they made big sound installation – a new work called *Murder of Crows* in old Pier on the harbour. And then there were many young artists on the island called Cockatoo which used to be used for industrial building of military ships. And because these was the first time it was used for such a major event and a little bit a discovery within Sydney something that the people of Sydney didn’t really know. And the other characteristic maybe was that there were many Australian artists. I think a good biennale has to have a strong presence of artists from the local context because a biennale is not just importing from outside. It’s not just about import. It’s also about cultural dialog that can be created between artists of a place and the global platform. The Biennale of Sydney, my exhibition, was the one with more Australian artists than any previous edition of that biennale.

**- How would you comment on the fact that there are more and more biennials and art fairs? How do you see their future?**

- I think they are two very different phenomena. I think it is a good thing so there are many more biennales around the world because it allows different places to become part of the cultural dialog. You know – nobody knew the artists from Turkey until there was the Istanbul biennale. Very important is that these periodic exhibitions happen because it redefines the global platform of art. So, I am very much in favor of this. However there is the biennale syndrome. *The Pantagruel Syndrome* was the title of an exhibition I did in Turin before Sydney and this “Pantagruel syndrome” is indeed like a sickness of our time. The rise of all these events in contemporary art is also two things – it is a good thing and it is also a terrible thing because when art becomes very popular it loses a kind of freedom. Suddenly for example censorship becomes an issue because if you have 400000 people seeing something then suddenly the governments think that maybe they should control. So, you don’t have as much freedom as when art is not successful and there are less public exhibitions. When art is apartment art, art is more free. So that’s one negative aspect is that a lot of people start to think they have the authority to interfere. I have two opposite views. The rise of the art fairs is a sign of something else. It is the sign of the fact that investors and people who are involved in money invest in them to be able to buy things, products and latest products. So you have more and more people wanting to become art collectors and invest in art. In a way it is a good thing but it is a kind of funny. I find it very funny because suddenly you have all these people who think they are experts and they really don’t have knowledge. That is one of the reasons that I included a lot of historical work because it is very funny when you meet a new art collector who knows exactly who Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons is but when you mention Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni, they have never heard of them. It is very funny because it is like a collapse of the depths of knowledge. And this is a collapse of knowledge and it’s a collapse of connoisseurship. Like if a wine taster knows wines and does not know the history of wine. You know what they were drinking before and how did different wines migrate. Some people don’t know that *Shiraz* connected its name with Siria. Certain migration of grapes. So, I think it’s kind of funny this rise of the art fairs and art market. I don’t think for art it’s necessarily a bad thing because I think that artists always escape whatever definition they are put into. So, for example there was a very strong art market around 1850 in Paris and there were sell 3000 paintings every spring. I think that most of what is bought and sold is just junk, but you only know this about 150 years ago. I’m not against artists selling work, but I think art is like

mathematics. It's very funny if suddenly you have people investing in mathematics. It would be ridiculous, in a way it is ridiculous what is going on now.

**- You are half Bulgarian – your father is Bulgarian and your mother is Italian. You were born in New Jersey... Your personal history is very interesting, as I have read in a text about you. Could you tell us more about you and your Bulgarian origin. Has your father ever told you something about his native land?**

- Yes, I would agree with you. It is an interesting background. I think it is typical of our kind of global age to have such a mixed identity. My father left Bulgaria when war ended. He had a permit to come to Italy to study, but he was supposed to study geology. He was young – maybe 18 years old, and he didn't go back. He changed his name from Bakargiev to Christov which is very common name and he didn't take back his name Bakargiev until many years later. He met my mother in Torino and my mother's family helped him to go to University because he had no money. He was studying Medicine, but he would sell medicine door to door just to have some money. And when he met my mother he borrowed some money for a bus ticket and then he asked her for her phone number to give her back the money of the bus ticket and after that because he had an Italian medical degree but even in Italy you couldn't work - if you are an emigrant you couldn't become a doctor because you had to be Italian citizen. It is a paradox – you could have a medical degree, but you could not have the possibility of working in an Italian hospital if you were not Italian. I was actually born in USA. My mother was pregnant when they went and in 1957 I was born. They had the typical life of young struggling people living in an apartment on top of a restaurant and spent some time in Brooklyn and so on. Then he got his American citizenship he went on to become a very very good pediatrician- neonatologist- taking care of newborn in Washington DC. He has a brother who is my uncle in Bulgaria whom I never met but I know he is a violinist and I think his name is Petko Bakargiev. I think he traveled and occasionally with the Sofia Philharmonie he has seen my father - they had a drink together or something. So, that is the personal story. I met my grandmother once when I was very small child – my father drove me from Italy to Switzerland and we met her one morning but she was not happy that he had married an Italian woman. So, you know – nationalisms that they got. I'm a big mixture and have both an Italian passport and US passport. I don't have Bulgarian passport. I still have not come to Bulgaria although I have wanted for many years. I know for example Iara Boubnova. She lives in Bulgaria, involved and organizing contemporary art in Bulgaria, but she has of Russian descent I think. She is a friend, but I see her outside of Bulgaria. Nedko is a friend – I

see him around and recently. I have met an other contemporary artist in Singapore – Luchezar Boiadgiev. Someday I will come – it will happen. If there is someone who organizes a conference or some other reason. Because I don't travel so much like as a tourist. I don't like too much but probably there is a very long interest and also, I guess, a sort of the fear of a seeing a kind of a homeland. But I heard very great things about the developments in architecture and design for example in Bulgaria. I'm very curious. I'd like to come. Eventually I will come! It's an interesting background. I don't know so much about Bulgaria but I would like to visit a small town called Elena somewhere in the mountains. I think there my father grew up because he was going up with his grandmother. She is the mother of his father. He talked me about that. I think he had a brother who died and he have never met. He died before he was born. Some accident happened. He told me a story once of finding cloths of a baby or small child in a suitcase in a shed back in the garden in a house in Elena. I have this very strange particular story, but I know nothing general about country. It is a very important country - I mean the whole story for example Christianity, the Cyrillic alphabet, ancient Slavic is ancient Bulgarian. It's a very important place. An interesting place also because in terms of globalization today it has an interesting history encounter between Mediterranean and Slavic and eastern, big history of migrations, kind of a past which is maybe relevant nowadays.

**- I think that you don't know but our contemporary art scene is not very well developed.**

**We don't have many contemporary artists...**

- It's very easy to solve that, it's not difficult, it's very easy. Somebody has to find some money and put people who are really good, like Nedko Solakov at the head of the School or some sort of a Center with people like Iara. The reason I say Nedko is that he is an artist. It is like Joseph Beuys when he was at the Academy. You have really major artists who are older, who are very good and they have to create spaces where you can discuss and study and experiment and do projects and performances and events and that's how you do it and then in very little time, five years there is an art scene connected with art magazines and a place where people can write and experiment writing about contemporary art and then you find some of those collectors – they are so many now, somebody who has a little money in Bulgaria and who collect and they can easily find space – a good model is Portikus in Frankfurt which is directed by Daniel Birnbaum. If you have a space which is both an exhibition space and a school then you can really make it work and then the artists emerge.

They don't emerge in a void. You have to have a reality where they meet. I think it's very easy for contemporary art to develop.

**- We have young artists who go to the big European cities to study but they don't come back in Bulgaria.**

- Oh, of course, because you don't have scene, but you just have to make, you have to set the scene and then they will. I mean, it is really not so difficult. It's easy.

But, speaking about Bulgaria. There are major contemporary people came out of Bulgaria. I mean, look at Christo. He was of Bulgarian origin and he really revolutionised art – wrapping, the coast in Australia, wrapped islands in Miami, the Parliament in Berlin and so on. And then there is Julia Kristeva who is based in Paris. She is also Bulgarian. So, I guess there must be something good about Bulgaria, if so many people are all coming out of there. Even though they don't stay, where they migrated, like myself. The background must be good because there are a lot of very important intellectuals and writers and artists. That just is like a proof. Kristeva is absolutely revolutionary. She even wrote a book called “The Revolution of poetic language”. It's very important book and crossing linguistics and psychoanalysis. If you did your center then you could invite Kristeva to do seminars and to meet, to talk about, curating in art or artists and Christo could come back and do his things. It would be really fantastic project!

**- You are author of many texts, books and curator of important exhibitions. What do you plan to do now? Recently you have been elected as a next Artistic Director of documenta 13 in Kassel. How do you accept this challenge?**

- I work on things but I won't tell you. It's important to be quiet at first. Otherwise you cannot work. It becomes just a spectacle. So, I won't tell you.