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## Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

in conversation with Valerie Midlin

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an Italian curator and art historian. Christov-Bakargiev is best known for her paradigmatic direction of the 13th documenta in 2012 and for her key role in shaping the scholarship of Arte Povera. She currently serves as the director of Castello di Rivoli Musei d'Arte Contemporanea and Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti in Turin, Italy. In 2019 she was the recipient of the Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence.

In addition to asking her for thoughts on the informe and art history, I wanted to speak to Carolyn because of her idiosyncratic approach to curatorial practice as facilitating the emergence of “thought forms”—as connected, but not subordinated to, theory, and whose operative force may be allowed to emerge through the act of curation. Carolyn’s exhibitions, to me, perfectly embody what Michel Serre once described as an “intention to body the reader/viewer into the rhythm of the global intuition.” This interview was conducted in March 2021.

VM — Valerie Mindlin

CC-B — Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

VM  
~~CC-B~~

Let’s begin by situating you during “*L’informe*”: You were in Rome, correct?  
And you just wrote your Alberto Burri book?

CC-B

It’s true, “*L’informe*” opened in May 1996. That year I not only published my book on Burri, but I also curated his first retrospective, which was in Rome at the the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, and then it traveled to the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and then to the Lenbachhaus in Munich. That was, I guess, an important book and exhibition that very few people know about. So, I admire you for asking me about that.

VM

Burri was also in the “*L’informe*” catalogue and the exhibition; did you

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I did, and I remember being highly impressed. I remember that it came after “*Passages de l’image*” in 1990. I remember thinking that “*L’informe*” was somehow another chapter of those large thematic exhibitions that the Pompidou was doing on important moments in art history. “*Passages de l’image*” had to do with the emergence of video and video installations—let’s say, film-based artworks in art—and “*L’informe*” had to do with a rereading of postwar art.

So now why was I interested in “*L’informe*”? Well, Rosalind Krauss is someone I admire and I know she enjoyed my work on William Kentridge. I admire Krauss because of how she looks at the content of the form and the form of the content, which is fundamental to understanding art. Seeing “*L’informe*” in 1996 was prescient for me, because I was in the middle of being the first curator and critic after Germano Celant to work seriously and internationally on Arte Povera, following my 1987 Flash Art cover article and my book that came out with Phaidon in 1999. “*L’informe*” is the source of Arte Povera because it’s the idea of nothing being static, immobile, or a “specific object,” and therefore a notion opposite to Donald Judd’s. Rather, it’s that everything is in flux and participating in an organic transformation—which is essential to Arte Povera—and this comes out of the organicist principles of post-WWII *informe*, and what was at the time called *Informel*: abstract expressionism, action painting, and so forth—dripping thick materials like earth in a Dubuffet. If you think about the late-1960s installations of the post-minimalists, whether it’s Dennis Oppenheim or Robert Smithson, you can see that the origin of their idea of organicism really comes from the mid-1950s, and from Gutai too.

Given the intention of the exhibition to kind of slice into and to re-route the reception of modernism, do you feel that its inclusion of Arte Povera in particular was not so much re-routing as a clarification?

For me, it was obvious that you should not look at post-WWII *Informel* as a modernist adventure. I would never say that Jackson Pollock was a modernist, personally. I would never say that Lee Krasner was a modernist. For me, modernism actually almost never existed. After WWII, I see sources. I only see sources in the beginnings of what would then become the idea of the artwork as a field that you can cross or traverse and that registers these organic transformations. So, I mean, I did not need “*L’informe*” to re-route modernism because I never thought in terms of modernism, you know?

This partly comes from knowing Carla Lonzi. Lonzi was a feminist and one of the founders of Italian feminism in the 1960s and ’70s, and she was interviewing and working with all the Arte Povera artists. And she had written about post-WWII *Informel*, and the influence of that on Arte Povera, and so forth. So, she would never think that there was a break between action painting

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idea of the artist as a great hero, which was the cliché of Pollock.

They came out of Situationism also, so they were democratic, or anarchist, even, in some cases, and they never felt an affinity with that idea of the “inspired hero.” But they did not reject the idea of organic systems and the flow and transformation of materials, marks, and gestures. So, I’m just trying to say that I didn’t need Yve-Alain Bois explain to me that Informel was part of something broader called *L’informe*, and *L’informe* is an appreciation of the unbounded and of the constant transformation and metamorphosis of things.

Let’s talk about the premise of this exhibition as a collection of manifestations demonstrating the power of a conceptual force or operation, and vice-versa, and your own conviction and practice of thinking of artworks as kind of transitional objects.

Yes. I wrote a lot about that during the 13th documenta, which I directed in 2012 – dOCUMENTA (13). I think that “*L’informe*” was a very good exhibition, and important, but I also think that my documenta was a much more revolutionary exhibition. Because if you look at it today, you can see how much came out of it—all the art work around the Anthropocene, the work around activist art, and the work around trauma, memory, and the destruction of art objects: these split into three different directions after my documenta, but they were all three somehow at the core of my documenta. So, I actually think that it has had a huge effect on the art world. I mean, the work of Donna Haraway and the word Anthropocene were not present in the art world before that documenta.

Well, speaking of the Anthropocene, something else we’re all thinking about right now is the virus. And I am thinking specifically about Elizabeth Povinelli’s sense of it being something that confuses the difference between life and nonlife, and how it is neither one nor the other.

Well, it is life. I mean, I have nothing in principle against viruses since they are part of any ecosystem. I am worried about the developing ideology of aseptic environments with no bacteria and no viruses because if you think about the primordial soup—the beginning of life on the planet in the ocean—there were certainly bacteria and viruses. Viruses are essential to the ecosystem. So, I think that the ideology that we are developing during this traumatic period of dealing with COVID-19, which we must of course try to eradicate through vaccinations, comes at a particular moment of our history, which is that we are in the middle of a technological revolution and therefore we are at risk of believing that through the acceleration of digitalization we can solve all problems. This environment is accelerating our wish to live in a world of robots and maybe even to become robots. And I think that we are developing a sick mentality, which will

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online screen-based life.

It is disrupting every area of the economy and the art world. I mean, just look at the sale of Beeple and what's going on with NFTs. I identify this as a form of counterculture, like graffiti art in the 1980s, that is trying to demolish and attack what it considers as elite art, which I do not consider elite, I simply consider culture. Let's call it, you know, a high culture; there is a populist strain of outsiders who want to demolish the art world in a pseudo-democratic attempt to democratize art. But actually, what this is doing is destroying our relationship with materials and why matter matters, why the embodied experience of art matters.

The digital revolution, combined with the disease of COVID-19 and maybe other diseases that might be coming, will turn our society into one where bodies are separated and our lives are very stably located in one place. Somehow there seems to be a dangerous alliance between the digital revolution and ecological movements that want to save the planet from climate change, because there's this fact that if people travel by air it increases their carbon footprint. But what people don't know is the incredible carbon footprint of digital life, because all the NFTs on the planet and all of the digital work that we are doing are heating up servers and they all need an incredible amount of power to cool. And there is no solution to this incredible ecological disaster due to the energy needed to cool the systems that run the digital world. So, that is hidden from people. There is also a risk that we're going towards a society of extremely wealthy people who travel around and normal people who are poor and can't move and must stay online, and they can't experience art.

Now, art for me has a lot to do with healing and trauma and the awareness of being a body and also of our mortality. I mean that we die. Most of those digital maniacs want to freeze and unfreeze themselves in a thousand years, or they want to go live on Mars. So, they refuse mortality. There's this idea that artificial intelligence will bring us to a world where a privileged few become immortal and the masses become further disenfranchised.

But, you know, my mother was an archeologist and she taught me to see the present and foresee the future by looking at similar cases in the past. For example, we all know what happened to the Maya civilization when they went into numerology—numerology has destroyed many civilizations, and the digital is basically a numerological system, right? The French call it numérisation, which we translate as “digitalization,” but it actually means numbering, turning into numbers. If you look at all the civilizations of the past, they generally collapsed during periods of excessive numérisation. Same thing happened during the Hellenistic period in Greece. Hellenism was a period of great calculations. So, in history, civilizations have collapsed when the balance between our mapping and

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If you think about it, *L'informe* comes out of WWII, the atomic bomb, and the Holocaust. And who invented the atomic bomb? Oppenheimer. And who was Oppenheimer? A physicist, you know, and what do physicists do? They translate the world into numbers. So, you get the good side of science, but you get the bad side of science, and generally societies never see the negative consequences of scientific revolutions until it's too late.

Probably. Is it incumbent on art to reintroduce—or reinforce—the phenomenological and libidinal aspects of it in opposition?

Of course. But I wouldn't use those words today.

Why not?

Because they're old. You have to layer them with new words. I mean, we're creative. We create new words all the time. The word Anthropocene was invented in geology in the 1970s. It migrated into the art world through my documenta in 2012, and now it's an everyday word that's used, but it wasn't used in the 1920s. So, we have to invent new words, because inventing words is like inventing art.

And it is specifically the attraction and the pull of that experience that is now becoming sort of contested and muddled . . .

Yes, it's very important! For example, artists are also making work that is close to what used to be called collage and assemblage right now. But the main question is: what is art? Some people think art is the art world, or, let's say, the people in it, like me. But I have not been in any way criticized or attacked so far. And sometimes I wonder why.

Why do you think you could be attacked?

Well, everybody's attacked in history. There are two forces now attacking the art world—or what we could call the art world up to COVID-19. And they're both populist. One force is the movements that want to democratize art and pluralize and diversify it culturally. These movements want to cancel the traditional Eurocentric narratives about art history and about what is considered valuable and what is not valuable. There has been, since the 1980s, a long, progressive attack on traditional Eurocentric art historical narratives—and that is now complete, I think. For instance, MoMA re-installed their whole collection, and when MoMA does something, it means the canon has changed officially. So there's now a multitude of perspectives on the history of art, which becomes therefore her-story, not only his-story, and which becomes in turn their story, and so forth. It's about the plurality of narratives that interpret the sense that

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the digital age, there has been a transformation towards a newer populist movement, which basically questions the concept itself of museums as centers of authority. And I think now we're in the middle of a populist attack on art in general. You know, it's no longer about just modernist art or Eurocentrism. It's more about the fact that, in general, in this alliance with the digital, the digital makes a certain populism emerge, through social media and through the idea that everybody can be an artist, and so there must be something wrong with the idea that there would be a filter, which is the museums.

So, it's no longer about changing the museums. It's almost about taking away the museums. How can we deal with this as a question? Where is the forum where these issues can be discussed—what goes on inside, and what goes on outside of the museum; what is the commitment of the museum to public art; what is public art? Where should it happen? Who decides which artists should do a public sculpture, and why? All this is up in the air now.

I think this puts at risk the very notion of culture, because every civilization since forever has had culture, and culture is founded on delegating to certain parts of the society the task of caring for the memory and understanding of one civilization. In some societies, it was the shaman, in other societies it was the high priest, or the church, or the temple, in other societies it was the curator or the museum director, or whoever was the art historian in a lay society. So the idea that there can be a society where there is no representational system that delegates to a certain entity or entities the task of taking care and conserving parts of the world so that our descendants will know us is dangerous. It's a populist and dangerous thing. It's like saying anybody can be president of the country, anybody can be Senator, anybody can be a judge, anybody can be a doctor—you don't have to study to become a judge or a doctor, you don't have to study the law or the history of legal trials. Basically, it's an attack on the concept of expertise, and that is very dangerous.

I've never received an attack, such as, "Who are you to be the gatekeeper, who decides that you're going to invite so-and-so to the documenta and not so-and-so else?" And maybe the documenta should be curated by some artificial intelligence that sort of synthesizes the wishes and desires of all humanity, and then makes the exhibition . . . but that, in my view, is nuts, because it's basically suggesting that we can permanently live in a Lacanian mirror stage—a moment of transition where the baby recognizes his or their own face in the mirror. It's a transition towards understanding that the baby is not one with the body of the mother or one with the universe but is somehow also a person. So, it's the becoming of a person. If you're stuck in the mirror stage, it's devastating for humanity.

Another area of attack comes from the boys with toys, the big players in

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on democratizing culture and increasing the representation of people who were not represented before, as was the previous populist movement. It's still a counterculture, but it is politically the opposite in the sense that it's an extremely conservative movement, which is about hierarchy and making money. And therefore, the more you sell at a high price or the more you're able to buy at a high price, the more prestige and value you have. They're in there competing for millions and millions, right? Politically, it's a form of extreme right-wing capitalism travestied as a populist democratic moment against the old art world, which, according to them, is elitist because only a small number of artists can enter the museum. According to this populist movement, we are elitist because the artwork in the Castello would not be viewable by somebody in Alaska.

What's interesting is that these two opposing populist countercultures are attacking the same thing, which is the traditional art world as we know it. What usually comes about when something like this happens is that the intelligence of culture somehow prevails. Usually, great artists just say, "Oh, fuck you all!" And they go shut themselves in a room and say, "I'm neither for, nor against, I don't want to be involved in this society now. And I will paint my bottles on the shelf, in my little studio in Bologna," like Giorgio Morandi did, for instance. I really hope for a new art movement. I can't tell you what that will be, because I'm not an artist, but it does have to do with what singular individuals can do on their own, in an embodied way, with their hands.

Is it about refusal? And then what is the museum's role in it?

Yes. I believe that great artists will come out of this, who are neither part of one populist counterculture nor the other populist counterculture.

Yeah. And that's maybe the new Bataille heterology.

Yes. There will probably be a new generation of collectors, because earlier collectors are probably shocked by what's going on in these NFT millions. You can see the two forces, by the way, in the [Sacha] Jafri sale of \$62 million, as opposed to the Beeple sale of \$69 million. The two sales are showing the two sides, which we just talked about, but they're both based on this giganticness, and one is coming out of an idea of rewriting history and art histories. And the other comes out of the other side, which has to do with digitalizing culture completely and eradicating any notion of anything having value in the physical world . . .

Let's finish by talking about the museum's role in all this.

Well, the museum's role is an important one right now because we live in a

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nothing new to that. We live in a world of acceleration. That is what we have been living in since the beginning of the modern era, with the discovery of carbon-based fossil fuels and the bourgeois revolutions of the late 1700s, which coincides with the birth of museums.

The role of museums, then, today in the era of acceleration, is to create the opposite. That is, we create a space of deceleration and a space of standing still, of immobility, of stasis. The art object is interestingly static: even when it speaks about the organic flow of energy, it speaks about it within a concept of time as almost an expanded instant and expanded static moment. So, it is vital to the psychological balance of society in an era of constant acceleration to be able to offer places where aesthetics welcomes the visitor through stasis. So that is the fundamental function, psychoanalytically speaking, of museums in societies based on acceleration and progress.

And is it to create a public or to find a public?

Yes, of course. Did you ever read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*? It's beautiful. It's about a house on an island in the Hebrides. Every year, people come in the summer and they open the windows. The book is written from the perspective of the house. I always like to think of the world from the perspective of artworks and from the perspective of objects, not just people. Anyway, one year the people don't come to open the windows and sweep the rooms, and the house is surprised, and it waits. And then the next year, people don't come, and winter arrives, and the house sees ships on the horizon. The reader can tell these are battleships. So basically, it's the story of WWI and of a house that was abandoned for some years because of the war, as probably so many summer houses are today around the world due to COVID-19. I haven't been back to my apartment in New York since 2019, for example. So, my apartment is sitting there wondering what's wrong, you know, where's Carolyn—it's almost like a dog at home waiting for its owner to come back in the evening. That's the role of the museum: the museum doesn't create publics, it doesn't produce publics—it welcomes publics. It welcomes the public into this encounter with the static dimension in an era of acceleration.

Your last question opens a whole new interview about the public and the fact that there is no public. Now, the public has become money, because we live in an attention economy. I don't think the attention economy wants there to be a free public, you know, a public that's not producing value. And therefore, if a person comes into a museum, and they're not producing value—if they're not on their phone producing likes and un-likes and reading whatever content—that's a real problem. So, I think that the evacuation of the public is the biggest problem right now. Our role of welcoming a free public, a public that is not producing for



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*Valerie Mindlin is an art historian, writer, and independent researcher and curator. Her work currently centers on questions of the legacy of the historical, theoretical, and formal dimensions of modernism; medium-specificity; and contemporary media ecologies as sites of art production.*

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