

MY PROJECT FOR THE 2016 BERLIN BIENNALE, AN EPISTOLARY.

Xabier Arakistain

Berlin, 2 June 2014

Dear Xabier,

I am pleased to announce that you have been proposed as a candidate for the curatorship of the upcoming 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. The 9th Berlin Biennale will open in 2016 and will take place at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin and other venues.

In 1998 the first Berlin Biennale took place, founded on the initiative of Eberhard Mayntz and Klaus Biesenbach – founding director of the Kunst-Werke Berlin –, in order to promote a representative and international forum for contemporary art in Berlin. Since the year 2004 KW Institute for Contemporary Art has been the supporting organization of the Berlin Biennale. Its significance for the cultural landscape is reflected in the patronage granted by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

The Berlin Biennale is the forum for contemporary art in one of the most attractive cities for art. Taking place every other year at changing locations throughout Berlin, it is shaped by the different concepts of well-known curators appointed to enter into a dialogue with the city, its general public, the people interested in art as well as the artists of this world. The German capital is continuously under change thus remaining fragmented, diverse and contradictory. It is this particular mixture of high contrasts and a relaxed manner defining Berlin side by side that does not only attract international artists, many of whom choose Berlin as their base and place for production. Every two years the Berlin Biennale explores artistic developments to present the unseen and the unfamiliar before the background of this inspiring atmosphere.

One of the important conditions for the curatorship is a predominant presence in Berlin during the preparations of the project. This should be considered during the further selection process.

Regarding the process:

The members of the selection committee were asked to suggest curators or curatorial teams for the upcoming Berlin Biennale in 2016. With this letter, each of the suggested curators or curatorial teams is invited to participate in the selection process by submitting a draft for the upcoming 9th Berlin Biennale. After an extensive discussion of all proposals, the selection committee will choose a selection of candidates who will in a next step be invited for a personal interview in Berlin to present their concept. The interviews are currently scheduled to take place on August 3, 2014.

The selection committee will choose the curator or the curatorial team of the 9th Berlin Biennale out of this group in August 2014.

We would like to ask you to send us a sketch or draft of a potential concept for the 9th Berlin Biennale 2016 of 3-5 pages and your CV by e-mail until July 1, 2014. This paper should include a rough outline of your curatorial approach as well as 10 artists (not necessarily to be included in the actual exhibition, but to document and to describe one of the curator's fields of interest).

The second meeting of the selection committee will take place on July 9, 2014. After this meeting we

will inform you if the committee wishes a personal presentation in Berlin on August 3, 2014. Therefore it would be good if you could reserve this day in your personal schedule.

We are looking forward to your suggestions. Please send us a short confirmation if you have received this e-mail, thank you.

We kindly ask you to keep the further practice confidential during the whole procedure. If there are any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

With kind regards,

Gaby

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art 29.5.-3.8.2014

Gabriele Horn

Director

Auguststr. 69

D-10117 Berlin

Bilbao, 30 June 2014

Dear Ms. Horn, dear members of the selection committee,

Thank you for inviting me to submit a curatorial project for the ninth edition of the Berlin Biennale. I must confess your email came as a surprise –a very pleasant surprise indeed– as feminists do not often receive this kind of invitation, and much less transvestite feminists. In fact, as you are all well aware, the art world is a bastion of sexism and amongst the fields of activity that is most firmly resistant to change. The latest figures leave no doubt as to the extreme gravity of the situation. While over 60% of art students in the EU 28 are women, museum and art centres hold a meagre 10% of artists who are women in their collections and include barely 15% in their programming. Your invitation, however, arrives from Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel recently announced that before the end of the year she intends to adopt brave and historic legislation that will, for the first time, require large corporations to include a minimum 30% women on their boards by 2016. Chancellor Merkel's announcement must have been met with enthusiasm by Ms. Viviane Reding, Vice- President of the European Commission, who for years has been waiting for large corporations to voluntarily correct women's underrepresentation on their steering bodies, to no avail. Vice-President Reding finally called on the European Parliament – not without controversy– to adopt a regulation requiring the inclusion of 40% women. Her request is currently under consideration.

It is in this context that you ask me to submit a curatorial project for the Biennale. You ask me to think of a biennial for Berlin in the year 2016... Think of a biennial...

1.- THE CONCEPT

“Think we must,” urged Virginia Woolf in her 1938 essay *Three Guineas*, calling on women to think about the looming war from the perspective of their own interests; for neither the war nor the world itself were the same for women and men. Unfortunately, 76 years later the situation has not changed sufficiently – at least in terms of the place women hold in contemporary societies– and when addressing this situation, the act of thinking still carries significant implications. Thinking is still a relevant socio-political action. Who does the thinking, and from what standpoint, will determine to a great extent what is thought. Therefore, dear committee members, I suggest we think of a 9th Berlin Biennale that includes women both as the thinking subject and as the topic of that thinking. Let us think of the Biennale as a discursive apparatus and motor that invites us to reflect on art and the societies it occurs in from a truly collective and contemporary perspective. Let us think of the Biennale from 21st-Century feminisms. Moreover, I also suggest a specific feminist perspective for implementing the project: one that explores how sex, gender, sexuality, race and class differences are constructed socially and discursively, and how these differences are transformed into social inequality.

Thus, under the title **THINK WE MUST**, my proposal is for the 9th Berlin Biennale, from the Kunst-Werke Institute of Contemporary Arts and other institutions, to establish a conversation with the city

of Berlin, its residents and visitors, inviting them to reflect on contemporary art practices, on the field of art and the societies it occurs in, through the art practices themselves. An invitation to reflect upon art as a realm of possibility that allows for critical thinking. All of this under the slogan: **THINK WE MUST, let us think about art biennials, centres and museums. Let us think about art and the societies it occurs in from 21st-Century feminist perspectives.**

2.- THE EXHIBITION

Being the first biennial to recognise and acknowledge women's talent, to officially apply gender parity, and to adopt feminist perspectives, offers immediate advantages. We will automatically be telling an "other" story of recent art history. In fact, it was only 40 years ago that women acquired a sustained and massive presence in art practice and theory, and they did so hand in hand with the social and political movements that emerged around 1968. These movements generated innovative discourses that challenged art as an institution from the sex-race-class triad, such as the feminist discourse, the LGBT community's; the diverse points of view that deconstructed the category of race, including post-colonial theory; and the various approaches that expose class as a cultural and political construct. Tracing these discourses in 21st Century art practices provides a narrative that has yet to be articulated at a biennial. This narrative would be charted through a selection of artists and works, establishing a range of intergenerational and international connections between them; a selection where work by "artists who are women" is integrated into a broader narrative, avoiding the label of "women artists" that so often isolates them as belonging to a distinct art subcategory.

The Biennale as a discursive apparatus, with the city of Berlin as its exhibition venue, could chart two avenues towards a grand experimental exhibition of contemporary art. **The first**, would maintain the format established in earlier editions; i.e., showing work, often new productions, by a range of artists at the Kunst-Werke Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Biennale's host venue, along with other institutions with which we establish a specific dialogue around the Biennale's theme and to which we make the exhibition and projects extensive. **The second**, would include a broad selection –under the same curatorial criteria– of works held at Berlin's various museums and institutions, delving into the immense wealth of their collections. On the basis of a detailed study, we would select a number of works and resignify them within their existing display context, labelling them as included in the biennial. We thus attain a dual objective: on the one hand we involve the whole city in the Biennale on a massive scale, highlighting its commitment to contemporary art; and on the other we share the biennial initiative with the broadest possible range of institutions and venues. This will generate a new cartography of the city with a suggested route of its art institutions, that could go from the emblematic Neue Nationalgalerie and Hamburger Bahnhof to others whose primary role might not be the production, exhibition or analysis of contemporary art, but that do boast relevant art collections and/or programmes, such as the Reichstag or the Schwules Museum.

3.- In your email, you also ask me to include in my proposal a list of **10 ARTISTS**. Below are the names and places and dates of birth of 10 artists whom I have been fortunate to work with and who could well be a part of the exhibition, since their research and production explore the fundamental concerns

addressed by this proposed Biennale conceptual framework. All these artists are present on the contemporary global art circuit, demonstrating that "the rise to prominence of minority art" heralded by Edward Lucie-Smith in 1994 is one of trends defining current contemporary art in the age of globalisation:

Zbynek Baladran (Prague, Czechoslovakia. 1973),
Monica Bonvicini (Venice, Italy. 1965),
Abraham Cruzvillegas (Mexico City, Mexico. 1968),
Kajsa Dahlberg (Göteborg, Sweden. 1973),
Jon Mikel Euba (Bilbao, Spain. 1967),
Claire Fontaine (Paris, France. 2004),
Guerrilla Girls (New York, USA. 1985),
Maryam Jafri (Karachi, Pakistan. 1972),
Ulrike Rosenbach (Bad Salzdetfurth, Germany. 1943)
Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Bangkok, Thailand 1970).

4.- In order to enhance the event's openness and diversity, but also its depth in terms of research and debate, the exhibition would be accompanied by a programme of **CONFERENCES AND CONVERSATIONS**, exploring art and contemporary societies from perspectives that make a critical use of the sex-race-class triad. We would also work on recovering lesser-known feminist texts on art. This programme would in turn generate:

5.- A series of **PUBLICATIONS** which, in parallel to the Biennale catalogue, would capture the conference and conversation highlights, thus compiling and projecting the debates beyond the Biennale's specific timeframes.

This concludes, dear Ms. Horn and dear members of the selection committee, my letter, which I insist is only a preliminary outline presenting the ideas that could underpin a project for the 9th Berlin Biennale. Rest assured that I will be delighted to provide any further details you may require.

With kind regards, Xabier Arakistain

Berlin, 9 July 2014

Dear Xabier,

The meeting of the selection committee for the 9th Berlin Biennale took place. In the framework of this meeting the members of the committee discussed your proposal and would kindly like to invite you to Berlin in order to present your concept in person. As you already know, one of the important conditions for the curatorship is a predominant presence in Berlin during the preparations of the project. This should be considered during the further selection process.

The meeting for your personal presentation and a discussion with the committee is scheduled for **Sunday, August 3, 2014, from 2 - 2.30 pm**. We have scheduled 30 minutes for each candidate. 15 minutes should be reserved for the presentation and the other 15 minutes for questions and a discussion with the members of the selection committee, followed by a break. For your presentation, it would be good to have in mind the previous history of the first 8 editions of the Berlin Biennale and the localization of the Berlin Biennale in the city of Berlin, with all interactions that result from this location.

In this framework we would kindly like to ask you to specify your concept for the interview with regard to the following questions:

- What is the relevance of the main idea/topic of your proposal also with regard to problems our society is facing today in all parts of the world?
- In case that this is not yet elaborated in your concept: What are the specific aspects and relations of your concept in regard to the city of Berlin and its specific conditions, sites, and moods?

Please let us know if we should provide any technical equipment for your presentation. We will of course take care of your travel and accommodation (2 nights); you are very welcome to send Friederike Klapp your preferred travel schedule to fk@kw-berlin.de within the next days, in order to organize your trip to Berlin in due time.

We are looking forward to hearing from you confirming your participation.

Many thanks in advance and best regards,

Gaby

KW Institute for Contemporary Art
8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art 29.5.-3.8.2014
Gabriele Horn
Director
Auguststr. 69
D-10117 Berlin

PRESENTATION

Guten tag everyone and thank you for inviting me to present my project for the 9th Berlin BIENNALE. As you can see from my CV, my main interest has always been the intersections between Feminism and Art, and my work as a curator has consisted in experimenting with those intersections in the field of art. The project I am presenting is the result of all these years of work and I must add that it has been a joy to develop it. As English is not my mother tongue and I want to keep possible misunderstandings to a minimum, I will be drawing on a written text for my presentation.

Since you are already familiar with the main outlines of my project, I will use the time available to provide some additional details and develop some of my proposals, whilst answering the two explicit questions you formulated and a third one that I feel was implicit in the same e-mail:

- 1.- How does your proposal fit in the history of the Biennale, what is it adding to the previous editions?
- 2.-What is the relevance of the main idea/topic of your proposal also with regard to problems our society is facing today in all parts of the world?
- 3.-What are the specific aspects and relations of your concept in regard to the city of Berlin and its specific conditions, sites, and moods?

If “what is not named does not exist” and if “to name is to politicise”, this project puts the spotlight on a universal problem: the position of women in the field of art, and by extension on their situation in contemporary societies. And it does so in the light of feminism. Thus, this project adds to the Biennale's earlier editions, and in particular to the last two. On the one hand, Artur Zmijewski established his vision on art's relation to social transformation and movements. On the other hand, Juan Gaitán successfully opened up the Biennale to other cultural contexts and subjects capturing the image of a globalised world.

Feminism is the only political perspective that does not corner the category of sex behind other concerns, and has therefore been most effective in theorising the sex-race-class triad. Furthermore, over the past 300 years, feminism was alone in fighting the discrimination, oppression and exploitation of women. And since the 1960s, it has also addressed the situation of women in the field of art whilst simultaneously producing the 20th century's last important art movement and a revolutionary corpus of art theory.

However, well into the 21st Century, we do not need to resort to feminist analysis in order to corroborate women's marginalised position in the field of art. Every indicator points to an overwhelming reality. The Kunst Kompass, a German methodological tool that, having been in operation since the 1970s, provides data covering 40 years that were highly significant to contemporary art, reflects the fragile presence of artists who are women amongst the top 100. Recent studies with a solid empirical basis in gender, age and nationality reveal that gender continues to be a major problem in terms of female artists achieving

recognition, and even more in becoming established. Even official statistics find that discrimination against women in the field of art is a German, European, Western and worldwide problem.

But we ultimately have to come back to feminism, which first denounced the issue, because it is feminism that, thanks to its accumulated experience, has the knowledge and can provide the keys to propose solutions. ***THINK WE MUST, from 21st-Century feminist perspectives, the field of Art, art biennials, art centres and museums.*** And the first thing that I want to propose is that we make a statement that we care about this central issue. Although the biennale has a respectable track record when it comes to figures for the participation of both artist and curators who are women, again, “to name is to politicise”. By officially addressing the issue, we will help to avoid fluctuations in the figures due to a specific curator's greater or lesser concern. This will be a local action, but it will have global repercussions. In the age of globalisation, and even in the biennial circuit, certain values need strategies to consolidate and extend them worldwide, in particular certain values related to human rights. Even though these values are not the exclusive domain of Germany or even Europe, they are deeply cultivated here. In this sense, ***THINK WE MUST*** strongly engages an art event with its social and political context and it does so at different levels. Berlin is in many ways a brand new city and, as the capital of a country that is leading European legislation to include women in corporations for 2016, it is also a reference of pluralism and of the new. My proposal for the Biennale encompasses the artistic production of the past 50 years. It therefore takes into account the fact that half of the city of Berlin was under a communist regime for a greater part of that period, and the other half was, and still is, the city of alternative social movements, with a strong feminist tradition, and since the late 70's Europe's capital of the LGTB community. Berlin is a living example that contemporary big cities are a multicultural reality; a blend of the universals of sex-race-class and as such are permanent links with the rest of the world. The city of Berlin, just like the topic of the Biennale, is local and global at the same time.

THINK WE MUST is an invitation to look at the world through the window of contemporary art, a window fitted with the feminist glass of the sex-race-class triad. Adopting sex, race and class as curatorial principles does not mean that we will be artificially isolating these categories, nor does it mean that we will be carrying out an anthropological or social analysis of recent art practices. It does not even mean we will be putting on a thematic exhibition. *THINK WE MUST* proposes to understand them not only as scientific categories, but also as political and discursive ones that operate in artistic narratives. These categories are not constructed in isolation; thus, the category of sex, for instance, is inseparable from race and class. The Biennale would project this idea. There would not be three interconnected different exhibitions, one on sex, another on race and yet another on class. The exhibition will present one broad discourse, made up of micronarratives connecting works and artists and establishing specific genealogies and relationships between diverse cultural contexts.

It is not an exhibition of women artists. It is an exhibition where half of the artists happen to be women, just like in schools and universities, where more than half the students who obtain an Art Degree are women. It is an exhibition where artists that happen to be women will not be shown as a subcategory, but as a structural part of the artistic discourse. It is not an exhibition of “feminist art”, the specific art current that developed between the late sixties and the late eighties on both sides of the Atlantic. Although it is an exhibition where “feminist art” will not be excluded and where its concerns are taken to another level. One thing is “feminist art” and another very different thing is to think the field of art from feminism. So ***THINK***

WE MUST is a “feminist exhibition” in the sense that it has been thought from a feminist perspective, which means that the issues related to the situation of women in the field of art, and society at large, are not ignored, but are brought to the fore. An exhibition curated from a feminist perspective that will present a range of works that very often will not be related by similarities amongst the images, but by the (quote, unquote) "secret" connections between them. The exhibition will seek to reveal the structures concealed in language, in institutions, in societies... starting with the act of thinking itself. *THINK WE MUST* is a feminist exhibition in the sense that it displays a feminist visual knowledge based on the investigations carried out by feminist theorists and artists who, since the 1960s, have developed a corpus of work; a knowledge that brought about a major shift in understanding what images are, how they are constructed, what role they play in the narratives that produce the world. **A shift in our understanding not only of the socio-political nature of images, but also of the act of looking itself.** Thinking an exhibition from feminism demands reconsidering and rethinking every category, including young art and emerging art. In this sense a feminist vision contributes to recovering artists who, for ideological reasons, were not duly recognised in the past.

The Biennale as a discursive apparatus, with the city of Berlin as its exhibition venue, could chart two avenues towards a grand experimental exhibition of contemporary art. The first, would maintain the format established in earlier editions; that is showing work, often new productions, by a range of artists at the KW, the Biennale's host venue, along with other institutions with which we establish a specific dialogue on the cultural construction of sex, gender, sexuality, race and class; and to which we make the exhibition of works and projects extensive. I am thinking in particular of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Kunstbibliothek am Kulturforum as ideal venues to present feminism as a global phenomenon and as a powerful driving force of social change that has generated a solid current of theory with specific implications in the field of art.

The second avenue is an invitation to expand the Biennale's usual exhibition framework that derives from acknowledging the structural aspect of the curatorial principles I am proposing. This second track would include a broad selection of works held at Berlin's various museums and institutions, delving into the immense wealth of their collections and their institutional discourses. Upon an invitation extended by the Biennale to the various Berlin institutions selected to partner in the event, we would establish an intensive dialogue with their curatorial departments. The aim of this dialogue would be for curators to select from their collections a range of works that tackle the socially hegemonic issues of sex, race and class from a critical perspective. The works thus selected would be displayed within their existing exhibition context, but also resignified by being labelled as included in the biennial. We thus attain a dual objective: on the one hand we involve the whole city in the Biennale on a massive scale, highlighting its commitment to contemporary art; and on the other we share the biennial initiative with the broadest possible range of institutions and venues. This will generate a new cartography of the city with a suggested route of its art institutions, that could go from the emblematic Neue Nationalgalerie and Hamburger Bahnhof to others whose primary role might not be the production, exhibition or analysis of contemporary art, but that do boast relevant art collections and/or programmes, such as the Reichstag or the Schwules Museum.

Xabier Arakistain

QUESTIONS

Klaus Wisenbach: What is your position on feminism as a woman ?

Arakistain: I think that to be a woman is a social position.

Götteborg: The Götteborg Biennial already had 50 per cent of women artists.

Xabier Arakistain: And that is so because the Swedish government has developed sex quotas policies for many years, not because the inspiration came from heaven, that is exactly what I am proposing. To start thinking that way.

Hammer: What is the theme of the Biennale?

Arakistain: THINK WE MUST, that we have to start thinking about art itself as an institution and also think about artistic institutions from a different perspective, within a different conceptual framework – a feminist one.

Fulvia: As a feminist, don't you think that we can think space in a different way?

Arakistain: I think that a feminist analysis of space shows us how patriarchy deals with space, how it constructs it. I think there are other possibilities for doing and thinking it. But I will be very honest, I do not think that space, like courage of freedom, are ideas that have sex.

---How are you going to do it ?

Xabier Arakistain: What needs to be done is to think in another way.

Klaus Wisenbach: Did you see Elle at the Pompidou? And what do you think about it?

Arakistain: I think that the fact that they bought an amount of art pieces by feminist artists and artists that are women was great news. But the show was a failure, in the first place I think that it is very perverse to organise the display of the show in rooms “introduced” by quotes from important feminist texts and do not mention “Feminism” in the curatorial statement. If I recall correctly the wall text said “neither feminine nor feminist”. But seriously, the show was a total failure from the feminist perspective. It genderwashed the institution by making noise with one show, but did not transform the institution in any way, not in the number of women shown in its program and not in the number of artists that are women in the collection afterwards.

Berlin, & August 2014

Dear Xabier,

In the name of the Advisory Board and the selection committee of the 9th Berlin Biennale I would like to thank you very much for your presentation last Sunday.

The selection committee agreed that your ideas for the 9th Berlin Biennale and the presentation of your curatorial approach have been very inspiring and well elaborated.

Unfortunately, the selection committee has chosen another candidate for the curatorship of the 9th Berlin Biennale. We ask for your kind understanding that the official announcement will be made at a later date.

Please accept our and my personal explicit thanks for your commitment and the time you dedicated to this project.

I wish you all the best for your future endeavours, and I hope we stay in contact and that you keep us informed about your upcoming projects!

Warm wishes,

Gaby

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