

GÖTEBORG INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

INTERVIEW

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NSFW/SVILOVA

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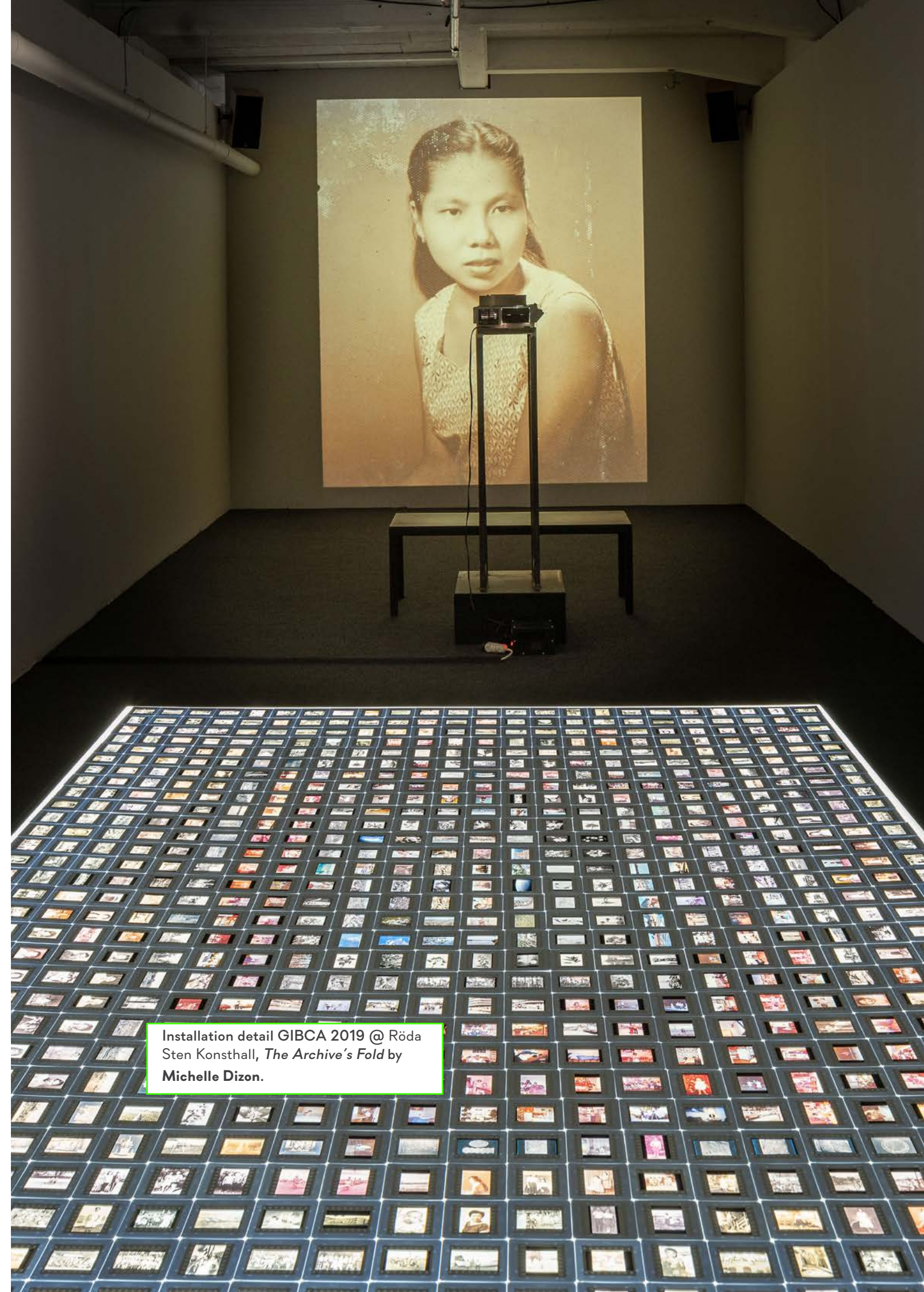
Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA) takes place every other year across the city's public spaces, museums and historic buildings. It brings an opportunity for artists, curators, writers and audience to discuss and engage in current issues within contemporary art.

We interviewed GIBCA's artistic director **Ioana Leca** to talk about the significance of the biennial in Sweden and its role in contemporary art.

*The following document is NSFW/SVILOVA's third release in a series of interviews meant to highlight the work of artists, cultural workers and representatives from institutions and independent platforms based in Västra Götaland County

*Cover: Installation detail GIBCA 2019 @ Franska tomten, *Walking with Shadows* by **Eric Magassa**.

All photos by **Henrik Zeitler unless stated otherwise.



Installation detail GIBCA 2019 @ Röda Sten Konsthall, *The Archive's Fold* by **Michelle Dizon**.

Hi Ioana, could you tell us a little bit about your role as the artistic director of Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA)?

As artistic director I develop the project strategically and I try to keep it closely connected to matters of local and global importance in art and society. I seek for the coming biennial curator, I research within and outside the art field, and try to imagine which of our current sensibilities will be relevant to discuss in two-years period.

So I get to meet many artists and organizations locally and nationally, to read and see a lot of art, and get to know more about the city through its inhabitants and initiatives.

However, on a daily basis, my role is of a project manager one – I tailor short-term plans and processes for each biennial, and then, together with my amazing colleagues at Röda Sten Konsthall and our partners, we try to make it happen. The closer to the biennial opening we are, the more hands-on my role becomes. The coming edition of the biennial opens in 2021, so we are still in a mapping possibilities and seeking additional funding phase.

In your opinion, what is the significance of a contemporary art biennale in a city like Gothenburg?

The contemporary art biennial brings the city an opportunity to think anew, through the multitude of artistic positions the visitors get to meet. We've brought forward questions important here and internationally, created unexpected alliances and dialogues. With its open format, the biennial has been a good platform for local institutions to collaborate in new ways, to share ideas, resources and audiences, which strengthens the function that each organization plays in the city.

During its ten editions to date GIBCA has also contributed to the international interest in the Swedish

art scene. The biennial is both a mirror and an incentive to the development of the contemporary art field regionally, it brings the city renommé and develops its art production capacities.

From its very start in 2001 the biennial project played a role in the internationalization of the contemporary art scene by presenting many artists in premiere in Sweden, and increasing the mobility of artists and artworks. Almost twenty years after, the biennial continues to facilitate dialogue and exchange between practitioners and welcomes audiences, be it school children or tourists, to meet contemporary art, but we do read differently now notions such as "local" or "international". And in the light of recent events, we might need to rethink once again what "international", be it mobility, cultural translation or solidarity, might mean in current/coming Europe and in the context of an art project.

What makes the Gothenburg Biennial stand out ?

I think the case of Gothenburg is an interesting one, since the city is the home of many cultural initiatives with international reach and relevance, many of them with an event structure. In a symbolic way all these events (including GIBCA) mirror the function of the harbor, bringing the world to Gothenburg, facilitating knowledge and giving perspective.

Unlike other cultural events, an art biennial is a context-specific project and I would say it is in this its primary significance for the city and the region lies. Since the beginning, GIBCA has invited curators and artists to enter into a dialogue with the city of Gothenburg and its citizens. For locals the project becomes a chance to meet the city through the eyes of "strangers", to avoid mono-narratives, and to address globally stringent questions from a local perspective. And many of the artworks commissioned



Wheredolendandyoubegin

GIBCA 2017, *Wheredolendandyoubegin* by
Shilpa Gupta.



Installation view GIBCA 2019 @ Röda Sten Konsthall, on view *Transcript of A Fallow* by Åsa Elzén and *Canopy* by Susanne Kriemann.



Public event on the history and legacies of Nordic biennials, in collaboration with Momentum biennial and Iaspis Konstnärnsnämnden, April 2019. Photo by David von Malmberg.

throughout the ten editions of the project had their starting point in stories or histories of Gothenburg, being then part of art presentations around the world, taking further stories of the city as part of other narratives.

GIBCA has been working with a format called *GIBCA Extended*, as a way to include and showcase regional & local artists to the international scene. Could you tell us more about the project?

The biennial is a platform for local, national and international contemporary art and since 2013 has tried to strengthen the visibility of artistic practices in the region both nationally and internationally.

GIBCA Extended started as an event, taking place at the same time as the biennial, connecting contemporary art initiatives from West Sweden and communicating their programme to the biennial audiences. Four editions later the project takes the shape of an open network, where the biennial facilitates meetings, collaboration and professional exchange. The initiative is meant to contribute to the sustainable development and decentralization of the art field in the region and brings together independent initiatives and institutions to share resources and knowledge. In 2019, 60 cultural actors from all parts of the region were part of the network.

What's extremely important for me personally is that the project grows from a spirit of exchange and collaboration that characterizes the contemporary art field in the region, with so many remarkable artist-run initiatives. It is this spirit and the support of these organizations that made the biennial thrive throughout its many editions!

In collaboration, the biennial facilitated meetings between regionally based artists and curators based abroad and has

communicated in 2019 a dense program of 130 events. Furthermore, we partnered with 3:e Våningen to present the works of 12 artists and art collectives based in West Sweden as part of a showcase exhibition for national and international art visitors.

For last year's and next edition you will be working with Lisa Rosendahl as the curator. What does it add to the biennale process/format?

We invited Lisa to curate the biennials in 2019 and 2021 having also in mind the coming anniversary of 400 years of Gothenburg. We made the decision in search for sustainable engagement with the site and the city, for sustainable working conditions for artists and in an attempt to avoid the logic of supra-production and rapid encounters that the global art market and art fairs encourage. I'm very happy with the outcome so far and so thankful to the dedication of the curator and the team for this long-term process. A longer-term collaboration led to more in-depth research for both curator and artists, it allowed more time to shape new relationships and increased the success chances of fundraising for the production of new artworks.

It gives us also the opportunity to test new formats for commission of artworks in public space. For example, with mandate from Göteborg konst and Trafikkontoret, the biennial is developing a series of site-specific soundworks. At the same time, we continue working in public space in a temporary format, at Packhusplatsen, in partnership with Trafikverket.

For the team this three years process means a sustained effort to keep audience-dialogue open even in the absence of an exhibition format and brings longer and more intense production periods. After nine biennial editions, it's a change we really wanted to make, we want to see what happens when the biennial remains an active conversation partner locally and if we follow the discussions coming from a previous project.



Installation view GIBCA 2019 @ Göteborgs Konsthall, *Prototype II: The Institute* by Doireann O'Malley & Armin Lorenz Gerold.



Opening GIBCA Extended 2019 @ 3:e Våningen. Photo by Rebecka Bjurmell.

GIBCA might have been one of the first projects of its kind to challenge its temporal convention, but I think in coming years many other projects might test triennial or episodic formats.

GIBCA applies for support every second year to continue operations. How do these affect your exhibition program? And how is that compared to other cities that have biennales?

Funding structures are very different from country to country, so I wouldn't dare generalize. GIBCA is in the fortunate position of being a project financed in collaboration with the city and regional resources, which allows sustainable development. And this is not the case of many biennials outside Scandinavia. However, we always make sure to have a scalable project until 6-8 months before opening, and of course fundraise as much as possible on top of our core budget. We keep dialogue with Nordic partners for co-productions and to extend our singular capacity, we apply to international support funds and often partner institutions both locally and nationally. What affects our capacity to some extent is that part of the team can contribute to the project mainly in the biennial year, but we chose to direct the resources to production and presentation of art.

Do you think the current austerity policies can have a negative impact on your activities? For example, have you felt any pressure to stop relying on government support and instead start looking for corporate sponsorship?

In Sweden and other Nordic countries contemporary art is fostered by the autonomy in programming that state funding guarantees in a democratic society, and the Gothenburg biennial is no exception. I however come from a geopolitical space where contemporary

art has a more vulnerable status in relation to state funding, and where it is often the support of corporate actors that makes possible a sustainable development of art initiatives, so I am always interested in partnering corporate actors as long as the financing is not instrumentalizing for the project and is not invested with other values. I also think that major corporate actors should take responsibility and endorse the developments of the arts in their cities.

However, in the lack of incentives in legislation for art sponsorship, the practice of corporate partnership for art production remains an exception in Sweden. And, given the current world developments when it comes to health, mobility and the integrity of the project, I hope state funding will continue to be instrumental for the biennial project and ensure its existence.



Installation view GIBCA 2017 @ Röda Sten Konsthall, *And That Is All I Remember* by Riikka Kuoppala.

The biennial model, as an exhibition format, has been replicated throughout the world. It is said that there are over 100 biennales worldwide. What are your thoughts about this so-called “biennialization” in the art world?

Had I answered this question before the outburst of a pandemic that showed vulnerability for both individuals and interstate policies, I think I would have been more reserved when thinking on what the numerous biennials can bring in a global context and would have reflected more on their role in the creation of value in the art world. However, at this point the large number of biennials in the world, that present and endorse different artistic practices, is something I find hopeful.

The first edition of GIBCA took place in 2001, in a moment when many cities in Europe founded art biennials, driven by an interest in international cultural exchange and decentralisation of the global art scene, so the biennial I work with is a result of the “biennialization” of the art world. To put things in perspective, 2001 was the year Wikipedia was launched, redefining how we relate to knowledge and information, and a time when not many artists based outside Europe showed their work in Sweden. And now, almost twenty years after, the role and radical potential of biennials are different.

Biennials play a major role in the commissioning of artworks and sustain mobility between artists, curators, gallerists, critics, collectors and visitors. And, despite the fact that the biennial format and the aura of the event is a soft power attribute to many of the host cities, biennials are a social-critical practice and sustain necessary global conversations.

In other cities like Berlin or Venice, commercial galleries fund parallel events. Is it the same in Gothenburg?

The short answer would be no. The long one...the biennial generates a momentum in connection to its vernissage, so many exhibitions open in the city at that time, many presented by artist-run galleries, which I would not define as strictly commercial. And I do hope in the future commercial galleries will join the effort to showcase to national and international visitors the contemporary art scene in the region in connection to the biennial.

Ioana Leca (b.1984 in Braşov, Romania) is Artistic Director of Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art. Recent positions include the Producer role for the 2017 edition of the biennial and Curator for Programme for the Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm (2011-2016). With a BA in Theatre Directing, she has studied the MA in Curating Art, Including Management and Law at Stockholm University and has been active as a.o. cultural strategist, curator and exhibition producer.

GIBCA was founded in 2001 by the Cultural Committee of the City of Gothenburg. Since 2006, Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art is organised by Röda Sten Konsthall and is one of the notable mid-size biennials in Europe. For every edition the biennial produces new artworks connected to stories and histories in Gothenburg and West of Sweden and aims to be an important junction between the local, national and international art practitioners. Every second year the biennial presents an exhibition format and an interdisciplinary programme open for eleven weeks.

Installation view GIBCA 2019 @ Gothenburg
Museum of Natural History , *Silken Sentience* by
Ohlsson-Dit Cilinn. Photo by Ohlsson-Dit Cilinn.



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