

# Talking about Abstraction...

## A conversation with Maria Lind

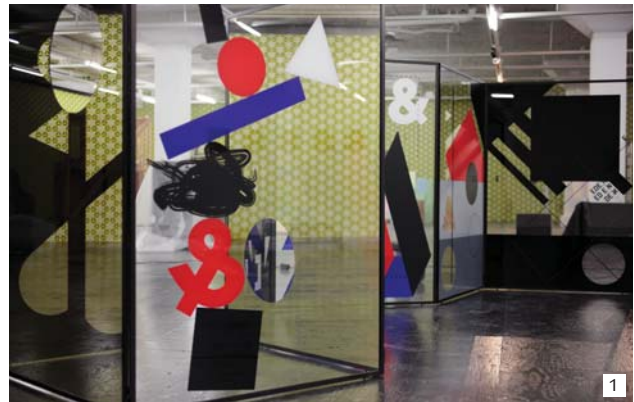
### by Silvia Simoncelli

**Silvia Simoncelli:** When you developed the *Abstract Possible* project, you explored it via three different strands: geometrical abstraction, withdrawal and economic abstraction. The latter seems to have taken a broader space than the first two, not only because of the rich program accompanying the show at Tensta Konsthall in 2012, which was focusing on economic abstraction, but also due to the many initiatives that you have developed there afterward, such as the curatorial summer workshop on "Economy", the series of public seminars "Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question", a series of panel discussions on contemporary art funding. Do you plan to keep on researching on this issue also with your next projects?

**Maria Lind:** In Stockholm there were different emphases in the different venues: formal abstraction at Tensta Konsthall (with work by artists such as Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, Wade Guyton, Hague Yang and Walid Raad), social abstraction at the Center for Fashion Studies at the Stockholm University (with work by Mai-Thu Perret and Emily Roysdon) and economic abstraction at Bukowskis auction house (with works by artists such as Matias Faldbakken, Zachary Formwalt, Wade Guyton, Iman Issa and Mika Tajima). This being said, things were not pure - there were certainly various forms of abstractions at play everywhere, across strands. The strand of economic abstraction was accompanied by a publication, *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, its release and a symposium plus a panel discussion co-organised with Konsthall C on public and private funding in Sweden. These discussions led to a series of hearings on the demands on "the broadening" of funding sources in Sweden co-organised with a handful of fellow kunsthalls in the suburbs of Stockholm.

I have a long-standing interest in art and money, which has manifested itself in various ways. The group exhibition *Exchange & Transform* (Arbeitstitel) at Kunstverein München in 2002 is one

example, a symposium at Witte de With in Rotterdam in 2005 is another. When I was working at Iaspis we did a one year long project with Marysia Lewandowska and Konstfack, and a number of artists including Goldin+Senneby, exploring notions of ownership in relation to art. It was entitled *Who Makes and Owns Your Work* and it was truly collective, to the point that we decided collectively on the budget. It consisted of open and closed seminars and culminated with an event where new art works took place along side debates and performances on the topic.



Starting at Tensta konsthall made me hyper conscious of the current funding situation for art institutions, having to deal with it every single day. Sweden, like many other northwestern European countries, has gone through radical changes regarding the funding of culture over the last 15 years, without there having been a proper public debate about the ideological as well as practical effects. It became clear to me that while we are doing exhibitions and other projects, with a special focus on mediation, like many other institutions, we also need to actively reflect and act upon our conditions of production. The three strands in *Abstract Possible* were immediately declared as our loose themes overall at Tensta konsthall during my directorship: questions concerning artistic formulation, interpretation and

organization; art and economy; and artists' conditions of work and production. *Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question*, curated by Marysia Lewniewska and Laurel Ptak, is an example of the two latter, as well as the theme of economy at the Curatorial Summer Workshop which we did in collaboration with Nina Möntmann and The Royal Institute of Art where she is a professor of art theory.

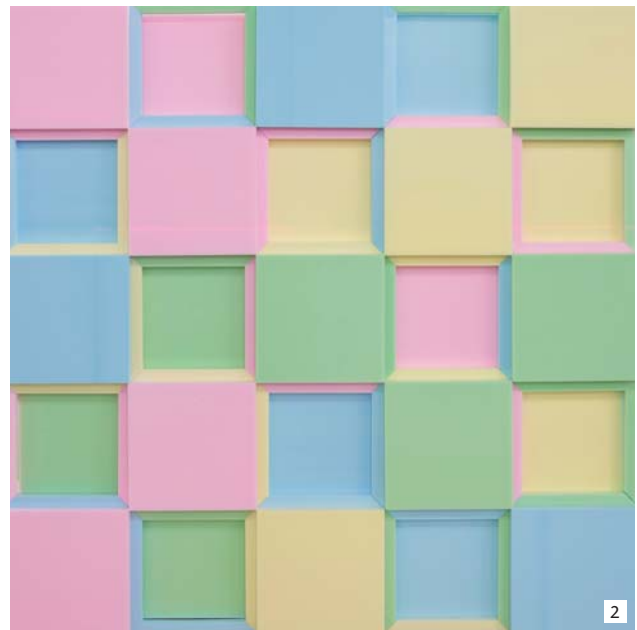
Our group of sibling kunsthalls in the suburbs of Stockholm are in the midst of planning a series of hearings mixing our respective local politicians and bureaucrats affecting our work, aiming at increasing their understanding of what small visual arts organizations like us actually do. The important values which we produce.

The theme of art and economy will surely accompany me further. However, right now I am looking at notions of the commons and commoning. It is related to both what we did with *Who Makes and Owns Your Work*<sup>1</sup> and *Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question*<sup>2</sup>, as well as to money and the total economization under late capitalism. The latter is of course essential to *Abstract Possible*. Here, property relations as being at the very core of our existence, even more so than economization, can be seen as the next thing to look at. All this feeding into the fact that in general I want to do things discussing the future, very much inspired by Boris Buden and his ideas around "retrotopia". I.e. that today there is still plenty of utopian thinking, despite claims to the contrary, but it is tragically enough almost entirely focused on the past culture of commemoration.

**SS:** While preparing for our conversation I re-read *European Cultural Policies 2015*, the book published by Iaspis and the eipcp in Vienna that you co-edited in 2005, about the funding structure of contemporary art and its possible future. There, the different contributors pointed already their attention to the growing importance of the private-public partnership, the shift of the art world agenda from museums to art fairs and the diminishing European and state funds for arts, in favour of the creative industries. Looking at the situation today, it looks like it took far less than 10 years to reach the scenario presented there. Do you think there is the possibility that art production and the related cultural production activities could be agencies of change for such trends in the near future?

**ML:** The way things go now it seems as if we will have even more of the same. In other words, we

have just seen the beginning of the creative turn and the withdrawal of the public sector from funding of culture. This is a long cycle. Unless there will be drastic political changes. These are political questions and as long as the art world, like other cultural sectors, stay away from palpable public debate and political struggles it will not change. It will still be possible to act from pockets of potentiality, temporary spaces to manoeuvre, but on a systemic level it will get worse. For example, I don't think we in a foreseeable future can evade or overturn the excessive, even perverse, assessment culture of neoliberalism. However, I do believe we are able to change some of the criteria of evaluation. Here the report *Size Matters*, commissioned by the advocacy group Common Practice in London is a useful and inspirational step in the right direction.



**SS:** In times of diminishing budgets, smaller institutions are trying to develop strategies to implement their fund raising possibilities and to exchange knowledge and experiences in order to benefit mutually from each other's. Together with Casco (Utrecht), CAC (Brétigny), CA2M (Madrid), Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. (Ljubljana), Digital Art Centre (Holon), Les Laboratoires D'Aubervilliers (Paris), and The Showroom (London), Tensta Konsthall created Cluster in 2011. Could you tell us a bit about it?

**ML:** As a newly appointed director at Tensta konsthall I quickly learned that it was not so easy to talk to colleagues about working there. The context itself, and the demands and expectations from funders, the media and others are very different,

both from what I had experienced in the past and from what most of my colleagues knew. For instance how we are expected to interact with the local community, mostly in preconceived and formulaic ways. So I contacted colleagues in similar situations, people running small visual arts organisations in suburban residential areas, or the like, in big cities in Europe. We met for the first time informally in Venice two years ago and there was a certain curiosity and enthusiasm at the meeting. We decided to form a network, which we call Cluster, in order to learn from each other. As our applications were successful we managed to get funding for all of us to travel to each other and to study on site, in detail, how each organization is operating. Financially, governing-wise, contextually etc. It has been extremely interesting for me, to have all these concrete other examples and this rather intensive exchange, and to do this without any other specific goal in mind. And I don't think I am the only one feeling this way. In September we will go on our last visit, to Ljubljana and then we will discuss if, and how, to go on. Perhaps it will lead to formal collaborations, perhaps not.



As you can tell the purpose is not to “implement fundraising possibilities” but rather a kind of consciousness-raising and solidarity building. Liberated from demands on immediate and measurable outcomes. I believe we will see more cases like this one in the future, with organisations and others connecting across regional and national borders, which traditionally are the uniting factors. In addition to CIMAM and other global associations which so far have not been so useful. Another example of a recent smaller network with organisations with shared concerns is The International with among others the Vanabbemuseum in Eindhoven, MACBA in Barcelona and Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana.

**SS:** In 2011 Andrea Fraser published her text *Le 1% c'est moi*, where she presented an account on a

number of art patrons who actively support the art market and artistic production, unveiling their link to the current world economical disparities, the financial crisis and unethical conduct in business. On the base of this account, Fraser encouraged artists to reflect seriously on the provenance of money that support their work and to refuse compromises. When organizing one of the two parts of *Abstract Possible - the Stockholm Synergies*, in collaboration with Swedish auction house Bukowskis you chose to make that problematic relation clear by actively involving them both as show venue and as funders of the book you edited with Olav Velthuis, *Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets*. This decision has sparked different reactions and comments. In an article in e-flux Sven Lutticken defined both Fraser's and yours as “impossible models, as models that have already failed” and which therefore “have their value in a situation without easy answers and clearly-labeled emergency exits”.

In his article “The End of Contemporary's Art Bubble Economy”, published in *Texte zur Kunst*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen looked back at the *Abstract Possible* exhibition in Stockholm, from a different point of view. He stated that the collaboration between Tensta and Bukowskis fulfilled at best the need of Lundin family, owner of both the auction house and petrol company Lundin Petroleum, to distract the general public's attention from the accusations to the company of unethical conduct in Africa. Seeing it as almost a dead end for institutional critique, Rasmussen suggests instead that the occupy movement and the protest culture of recent years should be seen as models and could provide a context where new structures for artistic and cultural production could be developed, outside the circuit of corrupt money. Do you see this perspective as an interesting and promising one for the emergence of new forms of art spaces and funding strategies as well? From your practice is quite evident that you favour the idea that it somehow essential to operate in a system in order to make its contradictions clear, do you think that this makes sense even when the system has already normalized critique as one of its many constituent elements?

**ML:** The part of *Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies* which took place at Bukowskis auction house for two weeks was a typical case of outsourcing rather than a collaboration, with a specialist consultant doing a clearly predefined task. In this case this was me guest curating an exhibition, being a consultant, where the art works were for sale at set prices, not at an auction. In collaborations you nor-

mally share both the input and the execution, you discuss and make decisions together and then you carry it out together. I guest curated a so-called primary exhibition, a format which they as a player on the secondary market have invented in order to simplify the entrance to the primary market, which is otherwise the arena of galleries. I in turn outsourced the conception of the framework to the artist duo Goldin+Senneby who for a long time in their work have engaged with finance economy and post-Fordist working methods. The result was that the staff of Bukowskis was asked to be responsible for the installation and the mediation of the exhibition, rather than me as the curator. Business as usual, in other words, and not a different, possibly sexier, set-up. The fee which I was paid for the job was used to fund the report *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets*.

One of the purposes was to put on the table and trigger a discussion about the situation of contemporary art and money, on the effects of the boom of the commercial art market, in and of itself but also on public funding. Which is a situation with which Tensta konsthall among others has close encounters, where the pressure on generating more income, specifically private funding, has increased rapidly. The boom of the commercial art market might seem distant but it affects things in most corners of the art world. At the same time as public money is more and more instrumentalised and in many countries also shrinking. In Sweden it is almost impossible to generate this income – there are very few foundations to apply for for contemporary art and the culture of donations is practically non-existing. This is a clear systems error which until *Abstract Possible* had hardly been publicly debated at all.

So our bringing the situation to the table was by entering the belly of the beast, being very well aware of the fact that in the current economic system we can never entirely escape the beast. To believe that you can escape in any fundamental way is to buy into the most comfortable illusions, like contending that using a textile bag for grocery shopping subverts the food industry and its negative effects on human health and the environment. You are shooting the messenger rather than the sender. Instead we over-performed, and did what cultural policy and our funders require. We were the cunning Stakhanov of neoliberal cultural policy. By doing it this way a number of contradictions were exposed and even performed. Among the contradictions is the extensive involvement in the Swedish art world of the

owners of Lundin Petroleum, a company using methods to find oil which must be condemned. However, not guest curating an exhibition at an auction house which is owned by the Lundin family, or not accepting them as buyers at a gallery or as donors of art works to public collections like Moderna Museet, does not guarantee that you stay “clean”. The whole system is impregnated with money from sources like this, whether it is oil, weapons or oligarchs ruining entire regions. It is the very fuel of the art world. This is clearly not unproblematic but the bigger issue is the passive acceptance of a paradigm shift which has direct – negative – consequences on what kind of art which is being made, shown, distributed and discussed in the public realm.

The so-called “protest culture” has been going on for a while, I often think of Seattle 1999 as one start. Many artists and other cultural producers have been involved and great art projects have come out of it and simultaneously been involved in and stimulating it. Everything from *Nine Scripts* from a Nation at War by Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes and others and *A Small Post-Fordist Drama* by Marion von Osten and collaborators to anything which Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri have made. It is not unlike the effects of the movement against the war in Vietnam, which did not produce art movements or a clearly defined style. The Art Workers Coalition was an important initiative for the scene and for the discussion but as Julia Bryson-Wilson has shown it did not generate significant art or new structures for artistic and cultural production. Instead it created an awareness and helped shape a sensibility which in turn is discernible in art works as well as curated projects.



The idea that protest culture would create new structures for artistic and cultural production is interesting and I would be happy to see such struc-

tures materialise. Unfortunately it is not so likely, at least not in the short run. Occasional projects yes but not structures. However, there are already enclaves of artistic and cultural self-determination which like the manifestations of protest culture have difficulties in creating organizational continuity and agility. In the meantime I am not ready to give up everything in the existing system, we can still create space to manoeuvre, here and there. The public institutions also belong to us and we can try and use them in ways which we find meaningful. I am curious what the consequences for a purist who seems to want a clean slate in favour of a certain kind of practice, like Rasmussen who has collected gallery art and worn tailor-made suits for so long, will be if the protest movement is to show the way for how to relate to art and therefore also to life.

**SS:** There is another topic which I think is connected with the option of accepting the invitation from an auction house as exhibition partner and deciding to offer works directly for sale, in a different circuit than the one of the gallery or of the art institution itself. In her project *Money* at Kunsthalle Bern, Maria Eichhorn remarked among other things, that the Kunsthalle used to sell artworks at fixed prices to sustain its activities. Outsourcing this function to an auction house as you did, not only makes it more transparent, but at the same time it looks as a comment to the fact in recent years more and more young artists are taken directly from their major gallery to institutional shows directly into the auction market, running the risk of compromising their careers if unable to maintain in the near future a production that matches the expectations of the market itself. What is your position about this?

**ML:** The exhibition at Bukowskis did indeed comment on this. First of all, in many parts of the world private money is since a long time directly involved with the non-profit sector. In some cases even as art works are being sold by or through non-profits, to their benefit, like at the German kunstvereine. Not to speak of how galleries and collectors can affect both which exhibitions are put on but also what works enter collections. Or marketing departments having more and more say in terms of programming.

Regardless if an artist wants to operate in the profit or non-profit parts of the art world, I get suspicious if they speak about a career, let alone worrying about compromising it. This is already a commodification. I would like to see critics, journalists, art

historians and researchers do deep research into the workings and effects of everything from auction houses and galleries to museums and universities. There is a blatant lack of solid investigations and scholarship on the current conditions of production.

*Conversation conducted over e-mail, September 2013*

#### Notes

- 1 <http://whomakesandownsyourwork.org/>
- 2 A series of public seminars begun in February 2012 organised by Tensta konsthall. <http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/>

#### Captions

- 1 José León Cerrillo, *Hotel Edén Revisited*, 2011, installation view. *Abstract Possible the Stockholm Synergies*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 2 Tommy Støckel, *In My Mind This Goes on Forever*, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 3 *Abstract Possible - the Stockholm Synergies*, installation view. Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 4 Haegue Yang, *Dress Vehicles: Golden Clowning*, 2011, installation view. *Abstract Possible the Stockholm Synergies*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

**Maria Lind** is a curator and critic based in Stockholm, where she was born in 1966. She is the director of Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm. 2008-2010 director of the graduate program, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. 2005-2007 director of Iaspis in Stockholm. 2002-2004 she was the director of Kunstverein München where she together with a curatorial team ran a programme which involved artists such as Deimantas Narkevicius, Oda Projesi, Annika Eriksson, Bojan Sarcevic, Philippe Parreno and Marion von Osten. From 1997-2001 she was curator at Moderna Museet in Stockholm and, in 1998, co-curator of Manifesta 2, Europe's biennale of contemporary art. Responsible for Moderna Museet Projekt, Lind worked with artists on a series of 29 commissions that took place in a temporary project-space, or within or beyond the Museum in Stockholm. Among the artists were Koo Jeong-a, Simon Starling, Jason Dodge, Esra Ersen. There she also curated *What if: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*, filtered by Liam Gillick. She has contributed widely to newspapers and magazines and to numerous catalogues and other publications. She is the co-editor of the books *Curating with Light Luggage* and *Collected Newsletter (Revolver Archiv für aktuelle Kunst)*, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: Collaborative Practices in Contemporary Art* (Blackdog Publishing), as well as the report *European Cultural Policies 2015 (Iaspis and eipcp)* and *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press). Among her recent co-edited publications are *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios and Performing the Curatorial: With and Beyond Art*, both Sternberg Press. She is the 2009 recipient of the Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. In the fall of 2010 *Selected Maria Lind Writing* was published by Sternberg Press.

**Silvia Simoncelli** is an art historian and independent curator based in Milan and Zurich. She is professor at Brera Art Academy and course leader of the Advanced Course in Contemporary Art Markets, NABA in Milan. She lectures regularly for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at ZHdK, Zurich. Her research interests comprise the relation between art and economy, institutional critique and art in public space. Recent projects and participations include: *Artists and rights in contemporary art*, symposium, Artissima, Turin; *Visions of Labour*, exhibition, Kunshalle Sao Paulo; *Who is Afraid of the Public*, symposium (together with Dorothee Richter and Elke Krasny), ICI, London, 2013; *Performing Structures*, exhibition, Wascherei, Kunstverein Zurich, 2012; Deimantas Narkevicius, *Revisiting Utopia*, special program, Winterthur Short Film Festival, 2011.