

“We want to become an institution”

An Interview with Maria Lind

Maria Lind reflects on how concerns of New Institutionalism became more accounted for and widespread during the last ten years, arguing that some practices that arose in this process are too institution-centered. In her current position at Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, she focuses on a curatorial practice that aims to establish a long-term institutional continuity.

Lucie Kolb & Gabriel Flückiger: How do you relate to the label ‘New Institutionalism’ for practices like yours?

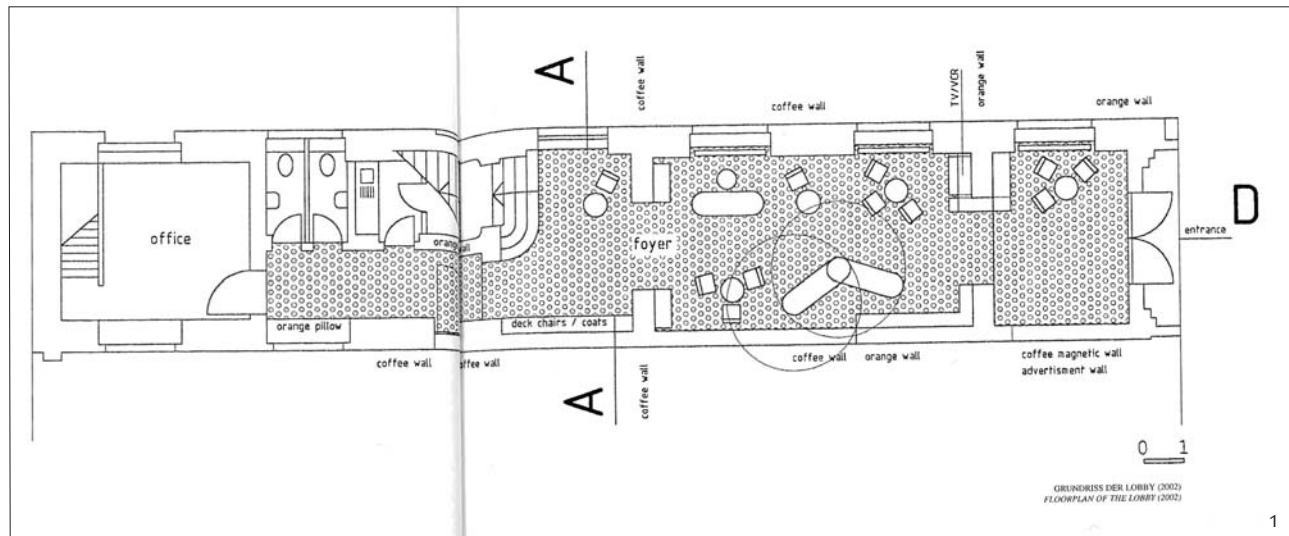
Maria Lind: It is like a nickname; it came from other people’s thoughts and opinions. I think it’s similar to what happened to some of the artists associated with Relational Aesthetics, which is not the artists’ own term, but all of a sudden it took over the reception of their work in a rather strange way. It is not completely inappropriate to speak about New Institutionalism, as we did indeed try to reimagine the functioning of art institutions, but it’s a bit limiting. The issue with any label that gets widely used during a short period of time is that it facilitates seeing the phenomenon as ‘consumed.’ It is supposed to be something that is ‘over.’ However, this is of course not the case. What Charles Esche, Annie Fletcher and the rest of the team at the Van Abbemuseum are doing, and what the team and I are doing at Tensta Konsthall now (currently the team consists of Fahyma Alnablsi, Emily Fahlén, Ulrika Flink, Asrin Haidari, Hanna Svensson and Hedvig Wiezell) is clearly related to what we did ten years ago. At the same time it is also different. In the early 2000s neo-liberalism and certain effects of globalization were becoming more and more palpable, at the same time as the social welfare state of Northern Europe was being dismantled. Those changes played into some of the thinking around and working with institutions, such as the ones mentioned, but also for example Witte de With under Catherine David.

Maybe it is helpful to think about New Institutionalism as an example of how deferred value is created, in the sense of how Sarah Thalwell discusses it in her 2012 report *Size Matters*, commissioned by

Common Practice in London. She describes how a number of small-scale visual arts organizations in London are producing a lot of value, but it does not become palpable until ten to fifteen years after the ‘investments.’ These small organizations work with artists who are not yet established and they develop new curatorial and educational models—they therefore take a lot of risks. However, it is not these organizations who can benefit from the value that this creates, instead it is the commercial sector on the one hand and the mainstream institutions on the other hand, who down the line pick up artists and methods supported and created by others. We can now see that a lot of what is described as the concerns of New Institutionalism is becoming accepted and used much more widely.

LK & GF: Would you say it could be a catalyst, or that the moment of labeling serves to establish a wider sensibility and visibility?

ML: New Institutionalism gave a name, albeit a limiting one, to certain developments that had already gone on for a decade. All of a sudden they were accounted for in a different way. It is good to remember that when I did Moderna Museet Project (1998-2001) for instance, there were hardly any reviews. It was really not in the eye of the media, nor did it have enormous amounts of visitors. The program at Kunstverein München (2002-2004) was not very well publicized either. However, today many people seem to be aware of what we did in both places back then. Which is a nice discovery and thanks to New Institutionalism among other things. When you mention that NI helped make visible certain institutional practices together with curatorial practices, I need to underline that it is a concern



and worry when those things come too much to the foreground, leaving art and artists in the background. I would like to see more detailed studies of the art works, projects, exhibitions etc. that came about then, discussed in relation to curatorial and institutional approaches alike. Only then can we understand what NI actually did.

LK & GF: Could you give us an example that was crucial, which could exemplify problems that one encounters as a curator, and how institutional practices should react to such problems?

ML: The program that I put together with the team (Sören Grammel, Katharina Schlieben, Ana Paula Cohen, Judith Schwarzbart, Tessa Praun and Julienne Lorz) at Kunstverein München, and how we worked there operationally, must be seen in light of the particular characteristics of that institution. It was a particular point in time as well. A Kunstverein is a membership organization, which since the Second World War has typically been a site of experimentation of different kinds for artists, curators and directors. Together, with me at the helm, the team shaped a program that reflected this legacy. But more than anything, it was to do with trying to follow the lead of art and artists to think about how an institution could be more sensitive to them, to be in the service of and in an interesting dialogue with artists. My way of working even before was to try and be sensitive to artistic practices—not lenient, but sensitive. This also includes answering back, returning the challenge. Because every artwork is a challenge in the best sense to institutions and other people working with art. A direct consequence of that was how we came to work with four different rhythms simultaneously, thinking a lot about the logic and the sensibility

of certain practices, trying to accommodate them. Monthly screenings, a yearly video festival, commissioned work and the Sputniks—which was a long-term engagement with a group of artists, curators, critics who were fellow travellers with the Kunstverein. The latter was a way of thinking the relationship between artists and institutions differently. The agents at the recent Documenta reminded me of the Sputniks, or the generals at Art in General in New York when Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy was a curator there.

LK & GF: Regarding the format of Sputniks, it seems that it is also a challenge for artists to develop a practice that may be different to how they usually work.

ML: We thought about it like that. We asked the Sputniks to give us input into what an institution of contemporary art could be and should be, and simultaneously they were invited to make a new work, which could take any shape and form. Some artists were a bit disappointed by that because they wanted a time-slot with set budgets etc. and they, in most cases, didn't do anything. Others jumped at this and came out with brilliant work, like Carey Young, Apolonija Šušteršič, and Deimantas Narkevicius.

LK & GF: Did you intend to blur the roles of 'artist' and 'curator' with the Sputnik project?

ML: That was not my intention. I've never been interested in blurring the boundaries between curators and artists. If it is part of the logic of the artwork then I can be on board, so to speak. My personal drive is to look at art, to think about art, to take care of and use the potential that is in art, by

thinking about how it can exist in the best possible ways. 'Best' in this case also means challenging and stimulating. A lot of the formats and methods that we see limit the art, rather than allowing it to blossom. I take my function to be to detect some of this and suggest how it can be teased out and combined with other works, places, people, questions, contexts etc. This is what I mean by "working curatorially," which also includes the horizon of not accepting the status quo. Furthermore, institutions have to support art that doesn't sell, and doesn't have other kinds of support, in terms of production.

LK & GF: You mentioned that the program at Kunstverein München was not very well publicized...

ML: We had a core group of locals who came to almost everything that we did, a bit like a fan club. The difficulty was the local art scene and the provincial critics in the Munich newspapers. Most of them thought that our program was neither relevant nor meaningful. One objection was that it was quite process-oriented and several program lines were running at the same time. We often heard things like: "It's too much, you can never grasp everything." As if that is the point, to be able to catch everything that is going on in an institution.

LK & GF: Did you have references or certain other curatorial or artistic practices in mind when working in that way?

ML: Primarily artistic practices. Work by people like Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Matts Leiderstam, Elin Wikström and eventually people like Marion von Osten and Hito Steyerl. I did not know the work of the latter two when I started; they were introduced to me by Sören Grammel. We continue to do things together to this very day. Curatorially speaking, there are some colleagues that I've always admired and respected, Lynne Cooke and Ute Meta Bauer for example. I also found Jens Hoffman's work stimulating in terms of formats, particularly early on when the formats had not taken over and overshadowed the work. Like *A Little Bit of History Repeated* at Kunst-Werke, which was a project on the history of performance art without traditional documentation. Instead, each historical work was freely reenacted by a younger artist, which was inspiring. This must have been one of the first reenactment projects in the wave which later ensued.

LK & GF: In terms of historical examples, is it completely obsolete to speak of institutional critique for instance?

ML: As a general approach to things it is important, but I was never very engaged with Andrea Fraser's or Fred Wilson's work. Robert Smithson is an exception because I co-curated a Smithson retrospective at Moderna Museet. And yet, Smithson filtered in more through the practice of the artists I was working with. For example the kind of transportation, site- and non-site, logic of Ann Lislegaard and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster.

LK & GF: In the beginning you mentioned that your practice now is still very much related to what you did when you were at Kunstverein München or at Moderna Museet, but also different. In what way would you say is it different? How did your practice at Moderna Museet inform your practice at Kunstverein?

ML: I could have stayed at Moderna Museet for the rest of my life. It was a permanent job and it was fantastic to do Moderna Museet Project. David Elliot, the director, was supportive of more or less everything I suggested, but I felt that the institution was too big and too heavy. It was hard to convince the staff members, for instance the technicians and the administrators: for most of them it remained strange to work with production, adapting to artists and their methods. It was too fordist for me, like a conveyor belt with one exhibition after another produced the same way. I wanted to try something else, where I could influence the methodology. I informed the director that I was going to leave at the end of the year but I didn't know where to go. In the meantime the Kunstverein came up.

LK & GF: The Tensta Konsthall is a much smaller and less heavy institution than Moderna Museet. There are different formats and sites, e.g. exhibition spaces, lobby, discursive programs, posters and the website, where different artistic projects parallel one another. It seems that a conceptual approach to institutional formats is an important methodological tool for you. At Kunstverein München you worked closely with artists, designers and architects on the concept and design of the logo (Christoph Steinegger) and lobby (Apolonija Šušteršič). How do you handle the institutional framework here?

ML: We are working with Metahaven, an Amsterdam-based design duo. I've always worked closely with designers: Christoph Steinegger in Munich, Åbåke at Iaspis and Project Projects at CCS Bard. It's important for me to work with people who are inventive and daring in terms of graphics and communication. When I started here I asked Metahaven how we could organize communication. Tensta Konsthall is a private foundation founded in 1998 and funded primarily by the city of Stockholm, a little bit by the state and all kinds of other sources that we have to find ourselves. These days we live in a culture of persuasion where we, as institutions, constantly have to talk about how we are the best, the biggest, the bravest and the most beautiful in the world. Of course we need to communicate in ways that make our program appear interesting and relevant. My question to Metahaven was: how can we do that without being completely immersed in that logic? Furthermore, how could we potentially communicate without a classical logo, to not be in the midst of today's branding frenzy? They suggested that we work with a mark. The mark has so far been a square, but that can change. Inside the square it always says Tensta Konsthall, but it's written in different ways, as it is taken as a facsimile from specific places where it has been mentioned. The way we look is affected by our infrastructure in terms of where we are mentioned, which means that it's also constantly changing, and the square can also change into something else. Metahaven's idea is influenced by how the architectural infrastructure of Centre Pompidou in Paris is revealed, as a necessary support mechanism. Today, the immaterial and communication-based infrastructure is as important as the architectural one, if not more so.

LK & GF: Are the flags only on display here in the café?

ML: Yes. This is another result of a close communication with the graphic designers because we started out with posters. A poster is usually mass-produced and you are supposed to plaster it everywhere, but we could never afford to do that. We ended up printing five of each and then using them only inside the space. In this way they became more like signs, which led us to talk about that we should do a sign instead of a poster. Metahaven suggested that we print it on textile, and it is brilliant. They become contemporary tapestries. Our café is rather domestic, and we want to be welcoming, particularly for women, as most of public space in Tensta is very male dominated. Metahaven designed our main sign

at the entrance too. It is made of concrete, which grew out of our discussions that one of my ambitions here is for Tensta Konsthall to become an institution. So far it has been run as a project. In a place like Tensta it is extremely important to create continuity, stability and agility. Almost everything here is run as a project, creating a completely fragmented society. I want to be able to say that Tensta Konsthall will surely exist in ten years time, that it is a continuous place. Another way of saying this is that we want to become an institution. Metahaven's response was that to put this across, the sign absolutely had to be made out of concrete.

LK & GF: To finish, we could talk about the situation in Tensta. How do you interact with people living here?

ML: Tensta is located twenty minutes by subway from the city center of Stockholm. It was built in the late 1960s as part of a big housing scheme called 'The Million Program,' whereby between 1965 and 1975 one million housing units were constructed across Sweden. Tensta happens to be one of the single biggest ones, with 5600 apartments. Today around 19,000 people live here, roughly ninety percent of whom have a trans-local background. The average income is lower than in the rest of the country, and average unemployment is higher. Over the last fifteen years a lot of societal services have been removed. The situation is not unlike many rural areas: there is no bank anymore, there's no liquor store. The local city administration is now housed in an industrial area in the middle of nowhere, rather than in the middle of the neighborhood where people live. This creates tensions. Just like in the inner city of Stockholm, which is strikingly white, Tensta is a place where segregation is visible. To have a Kunsthalle with an excellent program here is extremely important—I wish there were theatres, research institutes, and other kinds of institutions as well.

LK & GF: What's the history of the Kunsthalle in Tensta? What do you want to achieve here?

ML: In fact, Tensta Konsthall is a grass roots initiative that coincided with a regeneration scheme of the city of Stockholm, and from the outset the mission was to have an active relationship to the neighborhood. This has been performed in different ways by the different directors and teams. It is a private foundation, which today gets approx. 50% of its funding from the city of Stockholm and the state. These are grants which we apply for every year, and

which have to report every year. The other 50% come from collaborations, foundations—mostly beyond Sweden as there are basically no foundations supporting contemporary art in the country—EU-grants and private donations. I for myself want to make a program of contemporary art that speaks to people like yourselves, to other artists and other art professionals, that is really part of a discussion about what contemporary art is and what it could be. This is similar to the thinking in Munich. But I want that to be mediated in ways that are meaningful in Tensta, which means that we work a lot with mediation. However, it is always small-scale and it is tailor-made in relation to particular individuals or groups, where we try to identify certain shared concerns and through that establish what we could call a third space, or semi-public space. The notion of the ‘production of space’ comes from Henri Lefebvre and has been elaborated in interesting ways by people like Simon Sheikh. At its best, this is how I hope it works here.

LK & GF: Could you give some examples of how you produce space in that sense?

ML: The café is the most important point of mediation. We are too small to run it ourselves so it is run by a local social company. There are places where you can buy tea and coffee in Tensta, but not really a café. On top of that, those places are very male dominated. When I began working here we started something super basic, which turned out to be efficient: we visited almost all associations, work places and organizations in Tensta, often in the form of us having our staff meetings on their premises and then asking them to tell us about their activities. We told them briefly about the Konsthall and invited them to visit us, promising a guided tour. We also asked how the Konsthall could be interesting, meaningful and even useful to them. Some of them did not reply; others immediately had ideas, like the Women’s Center who told us that they wanted to hold tea and coffee salons in our café. Since then we collaborate every other month on salons in the café. In addition, we collaborate with them in a number of other ways, public as well as non-public, including having hired one of their members as our receptionist.

The Fashion Project, organized and run by our mediator Emily Fahlén for two years, is another example. It involves young women from the local senior high school who on a weekly basis during the school year meet at the Konsthall to work practically

and theoretically on fashion, style, life-style and identity. The activities range from workshops with designers and lectures on fashion history at the Center for Fashion Studies at the Stockholm University to discussions about their own choice of clothes and makeup, and exhibits with their own work at the Culture House at the city center. Some of the participants remain, others change, but there is an interesting continuity here.



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Maria Lind is a curator and critic. Since 2011 director of Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm; 2008-2010 director of the graduate program, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; 2005-2007 director of Iaspis; 2002-2004 director of Kunstverein München; 1997-2001 curator at Moderna Museet, Stockholm; 1998 co-curator of Manifesta 2.

Captions

1 Apolonija Šušteršič, This is a testing area for a better world, in: Maria Lind, Schlieben, Katharina, Grammel, Soren, Schwarzbart, Judith, Cohen, Ana Paula, Lorz, Julienne, Praun, Tessa: Gesammelte Drucksachen, Frankfurt am Main: revolver Publishing 2004. pp. 406-407.

2 Tensta konsthall, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 26.10. 2013-18.5. 2014, Flag designed by Metahaven, Photo: Jean-Baptiste Beranger.

3 Tensta konsthall, Spring 2013 13.6–29.9 2013, Flag designed by Metahaven, Photo: Jean-Baptiste Beranger.

4 Tensta konsthall, Cafe 2013, Logo designed by Metahaven Photo: Jean-Baptiste Beranger.