

# Ioana Leca, Artistic Director of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA), in conversation with Jelena Sofronijevic



Röda Sten Konsthall in Gothenburg, Sweden, photo by Hendrik Zeitler

**Jelena Sofronijevic:** The Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA) was founded in 2001, and takes place across the city of Gothenburg, on the west coast of Sweden. Can you describe the context of the Biennial, and the purposeful use of the Swedish language in its name?

**Ioana Leca:** The Biennial has developed with the context of Sweden's second largest city and Scandinavia's largest port as its background. Perhaps as a result of its port function, the city has two official names: Göteborg and Gothenburg. And despite the international nature of the Biennial project, it does indeed bear the Swedish spelling of the city's name. Maybe a sign of the times when the Biennial was initiated, in the early 2000s, the name is an example of the different attempts to organise biennial projects and communicate their 'uniqueness', placing the project under the realm of 'the Scandinavian', and its implications of minimalism, abstraction, care for the environment, etc. However, while not delivering on expectations of the Nordic, the Biennial keeps its name closely tied to its locality as a reminder of the position it is speaking and listening from. Gothenburg is a city with

a past marked by labour and harbour, where established and self-organised art communities make an impact on local conversations.

Invited, then, to situate internationalism within my practice, I decided to talk about the individual and collective efforts necessary to see and act beyond national myths and prophecies, whether my own, brought up in communist and post-communist Romania, or others. I think of the different artistic projects that challenge these constructs. One example is the film work *Sicherheit* by Saskia Holmkvist, Ellen Nyman and Corina Oprea, part of the 2017 edition of the Biennial curated by Nav Haq, which stresses the construction of colonial modernity in the Swedish imaginary. As one of the world's largest weapon exporters per capita, Sweden has, at the same time, promoted itself as one of the foremost alliance-free, peacemaking nations in the world. But in recent months Sweden, after more than two hundred years, has ended its foreign policy of non-alignment and neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

**JS:** The title for the 2025 Biennial, 'a hand that is all our hands combined', is taken from the poem 'Personal Effects' (2016) by Solmaz Sharif, an expression that articulates our connections and responsibilities, ones that transcend geographical, political and temporal boundaries. Implicit is the idea that artistic practices can promote 'solidarity' in today's world. Could you talk about some of the artists and their practices who will be included in this Biennial?

**IL:** With just a few months left until the opening on 20 September, I would like to acknowledge our collaboration with an organisation embedding all these principles in its core – Black Archives Sweden, and its founder and artistic director, Jonelle Twum. Black Archives Sweden is an archive that centres Black presence, memory and cultural production in Sweden. It operates across exhibitions, public programmes and collaborations, and navigates questions of visibility, erasure and historical narration, offering counternarratives and fugitive forms of remembering and imagining. Their contribution to the Biennial, in dialogue with the collection of the Gothenburg Museum of Art, reflects on collective memory as both a political and imaginative force.

**JS:** Christina Lehnert, curator at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in Germany, is curating this thirteenth edition. Exceptionally, Lisa Rosendahl curated both the 2019 and 2021 editions, a collaboration that your funding structure does not allow you to repeat, although others, such as Elvira Dyangani Ose in 2015, have worked on the more typical, single edition model. How did you meet Christina? Can you describe the relationship between the Artistic Director and Curator in such a biennial project?

**IL:** In the case of mid-sized biennials such as GIBCA that are projects within institutions running other types of contemporary art programming in parallel, the role of the Artistic Director very often becomes that of a host in relation to the biennial Curator. If the invited curator brings the project questions and research developed across a number of years, it is my role to help contextualise and

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<sup>1</sup> See Laura Gozzi, 'Sweden formally joins Nato military alliance', *BBC News*, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68506223](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68506223), 7 March 2024, accessed 15 July 2025

root the initial curatorial proposal. I develop dialogues and collaborations locally, run research, form the public programme, and am a dialogue partner to artists pursuing local topics. Working alongside a different curator for each biennial edition is really a privilege, having the possibility to think together with a peer whose choices are informed by other experiences, taste and knowledge. However, it is also a challenge since, unlike the Curator, I stay with the project across the different editions and bear other responsibility towards the audiences, the team and the local art context.

As unlikely as it might seem in a hyper-interconnected artworld, I invite curators to submit proposals for the biennial without a pre-existing relation. So the question of how to invite and how to host is highly relevant to me. This is how Christina and I met a little more than a year ago. Each collaboration starts as an exercise of trust and curiosity.

**JS:** Many of the artists in the 2025 edition directly address conflicts and social movements, including rising authoritarianism, polarisation, militarised aggression, and instances of mass violence and persecution. The edition explores how collaborative practices can uphold rights such as freedom of speech for artists and those in minoritised positions whilst resisting the notion of ‘monocultures’. Can you talk about this balance between respecting particular contexts and acknowledging ‘our shared present’ within the context of a biennial?

**IL:** Aiming not to disclose too much from the Biennial’s proposal, I’d rather not make any statements that are too general at this point. I am personally interested in the discussions and the policy-making implying or imposing neutrality of the artistic work as a condition to its value or funding. My curatorial process is very much a context-led one that forms kinship with different artists. I wouldn’t define my practice as artist-led; however, Christina Lehnert’s is, which I so much admire and look forward to seeing how that will shape this edition.

**JS:** As participants in the RAD Curatorial Summit 2025 in Bucharest, and the Autumn School of Curating 2024 in Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara,<sup>2</sup> you and I have had the opportunity to meet in a context which informs both of our practices. Much of my own research centres on pluralising representations of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe (CESEE)/diaspora communities and cultures, particularly from the Balkans and Yugoslavia. You are from Brașov, another town in Transylvania, and pursued your creative practice outside of Romania. Can you talk about your personal and professional relationships with Romania now?

**IL:** On a personal note, the relation is very much dominated by nostalgia/ostalgia and longing. On a professional one, I find the conversations in the art field in Romania extremely interesting, exciting and inspiring, having had the joy and privilege in recent years to meet curators and artists bringing forward questions that are relevant to me, while at the same time creating infrastructures

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<sup>2</sup> See Jelena Sofronijevic, ‘Letter from Timisoara’, *Art Monthly*, no 483, February 2025

and contexts for contemporary art to be possible in funding conditions very unlike those in the Nordic countries.

**JS:** On both of those occasions, we visited a number of artists' studios, exhibition spaces and institutions. We shared an interest in the work of Nona Inescu, an artist who lives and works between Bucharest and Berlin and who explores relationships between the human body and natural environments through sculpture, photography and performative interventions in the landscape. Where did you first encounter Nona's work?

**IL:** I came across Nona's work many years ago, maybe ten, in my previous position with the Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm, while searching for young Romanian artists whose practice I wanted to introduce to Sweden. It has been extremely interesting to follow her different expressions and research in recent years, and a presentation of her work in Sweden is still an idea I hope to follow through with.

**JS:** Nona's series *Daisy World* (2024) comprises a number of bronze plants, modelled after real, malformed specimens found in radioactive areas such as Fukushima in Japan and Chernobyl in Ukraine. The artist's interest in the materiality of the nuclear is also shared by others – including Rachel Monosov, who is also represented by Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Romania – and across 'Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe'. I am thinking also of the superb exhibition, 'Borders are nocturnal animals / Sienos yra naktiniai gyvūnai', presented simultaneously at the Palais de Tokyo and KADIST Paris in 2024, and expanded at the CAC in Vilnius in 2025, which includes the likes of Agnieszka Kurant, Emilia Škarnulytė, Slavs and Tatars, and Deimantas Narkevičius, alongside Cluj-based artist Ciprian Mureşan. How/do nuclear and environmental concerns shape contemporary artistic practices in Sweden?

**IL:** While environmental concerns have long informed contemporary artistic practices in Sweden, I would like to mention a work by Malin Arnel and Åsa Elzén that re-actualises these questions in interesting ways. It was developed together with Public Art Agency Sweden and is titled *Forest Calling – A Never-ending Contaminated Collaboration or Dancing is a Form of Forest Knowledge* [2019–ongoing]. The project implied taking a piece of forest land out of production through an artistic-legal intervention to ensure its survival in perpetuity. A fifty-year lease has been signed as an initial step in the commitment. The project continues Elzén's longterm work with the legacy of the feminist initiative Women Citizens' School at Fogelstad, formed in Sweden in 1921.

**JS:** The previous edition of the Biennial in 2023 was curated by João Laia, who was also a fellow participant in the RAD Curatorial Summit 2025 in Bucharest. Part of that edition was then shown at the Galeria Municipal do Porto in Portugal as an exhibition titled 'forms of the surrounding futures', where João is now Artistic Director. (*Dedicated to the Youth of the World II*, Roman Khimei and Yarema Malashchuk's 2019 film, which was part of the 2023 edition, also travelled on to the

Kyiv Biennial in 2023). How did the works of artists like Outi Pieski and Sandra Mujinga, and public reception, differ in this different context?

**IL:** That is a question best put to João!

**JS:** Building longterm relationships is clearly central to your curatorial practice. Awareness of the vibrant, interdisciplinary practice of Moki Cherry (1943–2009), one of the artists in the 2025 Biennial, is on the rise across Sweden. Moderna Museet Malmö, for example, recently presented the largest exhibition of Cherry’s work to date. Does the Biennial perceive itself as an institution, part of the Swedish and Nordic arts ecologies, that can contribute to public knowledge and understanding by building on and with the work of other institutions?

**IL:** Not an institution *per se*, and formally organised as a project, the Biennial builds on the in-between, as part of the Swedish and Nordic art ecologies and a facilitator of conversations and relations locally. Working across institutions, across state and private lines of funding, in public and semi-public spaces, the Biennial opens new contexts and creates better conditions for the artists, while trying to stay close to the project partners that have trusted us throughout the years. Fortunately, Gothenburg is a base for other international contemporary art initiatives, like *PARSE* journal or L’Internationale, as well as an Art and Design Academy and several art institutions, all of whom are collaborators with the Biennial.

**JS:** Some of our mutual collaborators, like Ibrahim Mahama, a participant in the 2021 edition, already have a very site-specific practice. Concerns are also shared by artists in different editions – I am thinking of some of the films by Sophia Al-Maria (2023) and both Noor Abed and Rosalind Nashashibi (2025), for example – but what are some of the limitations on who and what you can ‘host’? You have previously mentioned Gothenburg’s shift towards being an ‘events-led’ city. Does this manifest in more site-specific, even time-based and performance work within the Biennial?

**IL:** The Biennial mainly presents existing works, as the funding structure does not allow for full commissions or a strong focus on time-based and performance practices. On average, for each edition, 30 per cent of the works on view are new commissions, produced in collaboration with other institutions. For GIBCA#13 in 2025, the Biennial has commissioned one performance work, which will premier in the preview and opening days in September.

**JS:** What is GIBCA Extended, and how does it go beyond a more conventional ‘public programme’?

**IL:** GIBCA Extended is a project initiated in 2013 on the model of affiliated pavilions or satellite presentations, where different types of art initiatives in the region of west Sweden propose programmes developing on the thematic of the biennial. This initiative to nuance in conversation the questions brought by an external curator was met with much enthusiasm by local and regional

art initiatives and led us to reconsider the format of ‘satellite presentations’ and the significance of the regional and local ties for the Biennial project. So, over time, GIBCA Extended developed from an event-based structure into a network, facilitated by the Biennial. For us, it is an extremely important consultation space, where collaborations form and questions are being pursued with different sensitivities and with different audiences in mind. The event form of GIBCA Extended is still the visible part of this project. This autumn, more than ninety art initiatives in the west of Sweden will programme on the thematic of the biennial, a token of generosity from our peers and neighbours.

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*The 13th edition of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, ‘a hand that is all our hands combined’, is open between 20 September and 30 November 2025.*



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**Ioana Leca** is a curator and cultural strategist, and currently the Artistic Director of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA). Recent projects include the 2017, 2019 and 2021 editions of the Biennial, with curators Nav Haq and Lisa Rosendahl, a series of public programmes on remembrance and memorialisation in public space and in public discourse, as well as the contribution to the publication *Biennials as Sites of Historical Narration* (Mousse Publishing, 2022). Ioana was previously Director of NAU Gallery in Stockholm, and producer of numerous contemporary art presentations and programmes at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. She is the co-founder (with Hanna Lundborg) of the nomadic curatorial platform Konstkontoret.

**Jelena Sofronijevic** is a producer, curator, writer and researcher, working at the intersections of cultural history, politics and the arts. Their independent curatorial projects include ‘Invasion Ecology’ (2024), ‘SEEDLINGS: Diasporic Imaginaries’ (2025), and ‘Can We Stop Killing Each Other?’ at the Sainsbury Centre (2025–2026), and they produce the podcast EMPIRE LINES. Jelena is currently pursuing a practice-based PhD at Gray’s School of Art, Aberdeen, curating exhibitions of Balkan and Yugoslavian/diasporic artists in British art collections. <https://jelsofron.com>