

Maria Lind
**Made to Fit, or
The Gathering
of the Balloons**

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 [Maria Lind](#)
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Whereas size is set, scale is situational. It is the difference between hegemony and relations, the distinction between being willing and able to see yourself next to others and not being able to. Between aspiring to be king of the hill and wanting to play with those already on the playground. Whereas the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris is big in size, the Venice Biennale is large in scale. One is consolidated and monolithic and the other is scattered and distributed. And yet both suffer from the magnitude that determines the art and the ways in which it is presented, pushing art into overblown, even grotesque costumes that clearly do not fit. Costumes that stifle the work and spoil its potential.

At the same time, the Louis Vuitton Foundation as well as the Venice Biennale can be described as amplifiers. An amplifier helps modify the input. This typically means enlarging the input, or making the quiet louder. It is a well-known method among mainstream art institutions, the majors that unashamedly profit from the minors' decades of risk-taking and other investments, but whose precarious conditions persist. But amplification can also allow the soft-spoken to be heard, modulating the nuances of that which is being amplified. It can make the best of the nuances, nurturing their contingencies. Sadly, and somewhat strangely, only a few big institutions and events like biennials succeed in doing so. There are a precious minority that manage to maintain complexity and sophistication, and sometimes even achieve some synergy. Among recent successful examples are the 9th Bienal do Mercosul, *Weather Permitting*, curated by Sofia Hernandez Chong Cuy; the 11th International Istanbul Biennial, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?*, curated by WHW; and the 28th Bienal de São Paulo, *In Living Contact*, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen.

In these latter cases, addition means an increase in volume, but is not synonymous with assimilation into the structure and ambitions of the event as a whole, in terms of branding or otherwise. As opposed to the Louis Vuitton Foundation, for instance, this is a kind of accumulation that does not mean more of the same. It does not absorb and standardize. However, in the former examples the actual dimensions affect the work negatively, a growth that entails a homogenization and a leveling out. At the Louis Vuitton Foundation the sheer size and marketing ambitions crush whatever substance is there, to the extent that even the greatest artists and artworks don't stand a chance in maintaining artistic or any other integrity. This year's Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, in

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Balloons gather in the Paris skyline in the 1956 film *The Red Balloon*.

which Supercommunity has come about, suffers from related things, as a majority of Venice's previous editions do. With the current edition, for once, art from literally all over the world with certain affinities and shared concerns (some more interesting than others) is gathered in one place. But the artworks are boxed into fairly similar booths like an art fair, preventing them from rubbing up against each other. This simultaneous separation and streamlining in terms of size and mode of presentation leads to a grandiose lost opportunity.

This can be thought of as a question of critical mass, as a need to reach a certain crucial limit. Critical mass is typically described as a tipping point where a certain density makes something else possible. It is the amount necessary to start a chain reaction in nuclear physics. It can also imply social dynamics or majority consensus when the rate of adoption of an innovation begins to sustain itself and generate further growth. At heart, it is about being big enough to make a difference. Neither the Louis Vuitton Foundation nor the Venice Biennale do that. Instead, they suck out whatever oxygen there was to start with and become zombie-like. Again, this dilemma is familiar to many other big art institutions and events, raising the question: Why? Is there no desire, no ability? A combination of the two? The latter is more likely the case, as measures of success have moved firmly towards quantitative criteria and bombastic entertainment. This actualizes the inquiry about what productive figures of scale do exist, or could be brought into being.

This is related to the art world's schoolyard dilemma concerning the bullies and the rest. The moment the bullies grab the ball and prevent the game from continuing is the moment when art loses its character as a quasi-object and becomes static, when Michel Serres's football turns to a rock. Serres's insistence on art being something which is put in motion by numerous protagonists, circulating between them to make a collective, has perhaps never before been so urgent. If the ball stays with one person it makes an individual, but it becomes meaningless when it isn't used. It has no value whatsoever. In other words, relation is privileged over being.

Today, this has become an entire territory to struggle over rather than just a shared object to play with and fight over. This is when the good old refrain of "connecting the dots" becomes necessary. The minors must join forces, even across great distances, to reach a different kind of critical mass. Different from a network utopia, this is where the shared concerns of their awkward or unlikely resilience and necessary agility come to the fore – often when it appears

to be impossible.

Despite its daunting dimensions, the Supercommunity project seems to function a bit like this. It is an amorphous assemblage of people, ideas, opinions, questions, projects, and so forth – one year's worth of *e-flux journal* issues jammed into around one hundred days, making certain links and rifts palpable. What sometimes feels like another instance of overproduction is here put to work in a different way, with the large scale suddenly becoming essential. Almost like a giant but brittle and irregular net cast over the globe. In this way the Supercommunity appears to break away from the kind of continuous horizontal, territorial expansion that the Paris and Venice cases exemplify. Instead, it is digging down and reaching up, insisting on vertical explorations as well as discontinuous laterality. Maintaining a gentle sense of mobilization in the face of things falling apart.

Like a present-day echo of Herbert Marcuse's insistence on the real potential of change against all odds, art makes itself known as a dandelion rising up out of the concrete. Not "art" but art, without whims or frills, surviving the least conducive conditions. Art which allows for the kind of dissent that slips through the ravines and cracks of the day-to-day keeping up of appearances and saving face. Art which is uncomfortable and magical, boring and sophisticated.

While hard to characterize out of context, this art tends to manifest a certain kind of sensitivity that does not comply with the status quo of blind expansion. It exemplifies attitudes and sensibilities that are not valued by the zombie institutions and mega-events where they are flattened or even ignored. "Art" takes its place within bully expansionism. Whereas there are many examples of dandelion art in *Weather Permitting, What Keeps Mankind Alive?*, and *In Living Contact*, there are none at the Louis Vuitton Foundation. In *All the World's Futures*, projects by Mounira Al Solh, Massinissa Selmani, Gluklya (part of Chto Delat/What is to be done?), Lili Reynaud Dewar, Elena Damiani, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Rirkrit Tiravanija come to mind as some examples.

While maintaining its nuances and contradictions, the art of the dandelion needs amplification. It doesn't need a bigger size or a massive scale, but an accumulation of discrete entities passing the ball between each other. It requires distributed sensibilities that erupt and consolidate at certain moments in particular places. It needs active circulation, not unlike in the 1956 children's film *The Red Balloon*. In the film, a boy encounters a big bright red balloon on his way to school in Paris. The cheeky balloon

quickly takes on a life of its own, turning the almost entirely wordless film into a story about a day in the life of a balloon and a boy. They wander the streets of a metropolis, with the balloon as a sentient quasi-object moving between the hands of adults and children in the grey city. At one point the balloon and the boy outfox a gang of aggressive boys who want to destroy it. In the end, the bullying boys put an end to the lively balloon using a slingshot. The sadness of the boy is soon overtaken by surprise: all the balloons of Paris leave their vendors and owners to seek out the boy. The balloons bundle together and lift him away from the bullies.

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