

CURATORS

Off-Road Conceptualist: Krist Gruijthuijsen

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"Dissolution – Raivo Puusemp in dialogue with" installation view at Tallinn Art Hall, 2017
Photo: Karel Koplimets, Tallinn Art Hall

Krist Gruijthuijsen opened his first season as director and chief curator at Berlin's KW (<http://www.kw-berlin.de/en/>) Institute for Contemporary Art (<http://www.kw-berlin.de/en/>) with works by the South African artist Ian Wilson (b. 1940) and three correlated solo exhibitions by Hanne Lippard, Adam Pendleton, and Paul Elliman. Recently Gruijthuijsen opened another exhibition, *Dissolution – Raivo Puusemp in Dialogue With*, at Tallinna Kunstihoone (<https://www.kunstihoone.ee/en/>) in Tallinn, Estonia, in which artworks by Krõõt Juurak, Flo Kasearu, Kristina

Norman, Mark Raidpere, and Margit Säde are set in dialogue with works by Raivo Puusemp. For both shows, Krist followed a particular conceptual formula: asking younger generations of artists to reinterpret the work of a not-so-well-known artist.

STACEY KOOSEL: You started as the director and chief curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin in July 2016, and according to the press there is a new direction for the institute, referred to as "artist driven." What does that mean for you?

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN: It's not that it wasn't there before, but this is more related to my curatorial thinking, and what I think an art institution should do. The whole program is through the lens of the artist. I can have an agenda around how I want to program things, but in the end it's the artist's voice and way of representing things. "Artist driven" means that everything is through and by the artists, and that the other curators and I are providing frameworks for the artists to be provoked by. It's a dialogue, of course, as things unfold. For example in the exhibition you visited at KW in Berlin, you can very clearly see that I imposed something on the artist as a conversation. I like the idea of a dialogue with an artist; it's not simply an invitation but a conversation that happens through me putting constraints on them and them putting constraints on me. So it's a bit of a mix, but in the end it's not about how *I* come out of the conversation, but about how *they* come out of the conversation.

SK: How does this all fit into the history of KW and the direction taken by the former director, Gabriele Horn?

KG: The institution was founded with Klaus Biesenbach at the forefront, along with a group of other younger art and cultural producers. He launched it in 1991, soon after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and it rapidly developed an international focus, as Klaus always had connections to the United States and brought in all these people from outside Germany. KW developed as the city developed, and became very prominent internationally. It started to adopt the concept of an ICA, where you include many other forms of art, like film and dance. When Gabriele Horn took over the executive directorship, she implemented a new structure where there is a separate chief curator who oversees the content. So Gabriele was running the institution on the administrative and strategic level, and the curators were running the artistic program. In the late 1990s KW founded the Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, and that became a much bigger entity. For eleven years Gabriele Horn was directing both, the Berlin Biennale and KW, which was a very intense thing to do. Finally the Berlin Biennale grew to such an extent that it was clearly better to divide things into two separate institutions with two different directors. Now Gabriele solely directs the Berlin Biennale and I direct KW. I'm both the director and the chief curator, so those roles have once more been combined, and I recruited a curatorial team to work with.

SK: With this show at KW in Berlin with Ian Wilson, and the Raivo Puusemp project in Tallinn, you have a formula that begins with an artist who is a bit invisible, outside, forgotten, or as you have called it, an "off-road conceptualist." How did you decide on these particular individuals? And then why frame exhibitions around such figures?

KG: This is bit of a long, so bear with me. My background is as an artist, and my original interest was always in theater, so I think a lot of things I do make sense through the lens of theater, but in the most abstract, theoretical sense, involving the notion of framing and reality and understanding the function of art and life within that question. In the early 2000s I started to research artists who were simply not interested in being artists anymore, because their work at some point asked them to not make art anymore. So it's portraits of people who at earlier stages in their lives were artists. It breaks with the romantic notion of the eternal artist, but approaches the idea by thinking about the very pragmatic but also emotional and political positions that one takes in society. I'm interested in the paradox, the myth, and the idea, of the withdrawal of the artist, and then someone like myself, who is clearly representing a position in the art world, using or instrumentalizing that. I am thinking about when certain characters in certain positions need to be re-discussed or positioned again. Ian Wilson is perhaps the most immaterialized artist alive; I've used him as an eternal love letter in my thinking about exhibitions and institutional programming. Wilson decided at one point that the only form in which art could communicate is in language, which is a metaphor for an art institution. So for me, he is a frame to look at and through—to think about the architecture of the space, the mediation of the institution, the programs. With Raivo Puusemp, that exhibition was initiated five years ago, in relation to how the idea of art cannot solely be a gesture toward politics but can actually use its own form as a way to become political without politics being immediately aware of the format. Puusemp was not being a mayor as an artistic gesture; he was being a mayor *and* being an artist. I think this takes a real understanding of the world around you, that you can have many different tasks in the world. Just because I have a responsibility as a director of an institution doesn't mean I can't also be a mayor, or working for a political party, or whatever. I can do many things at the same time. Of course they feed into each other.

SK: As the director of KW, do you see yourself as an artist?

KG: No, I don't see myself as an artist in that position. That needs to be very clear: I see myself as a director of an institution. If I start calling what I do an artwork, then we'd have a big problem.

SK: What influences your vision as a curator? Do you mine your own personal history and tastes, or are you more influenced by the outside world?

KG: My influences can come from various impulses, but are mostly about my understanding of the self and the radical position an individual can take in society.

SK: What is the difference, to your mind, between the artists you choose to work with today and the "framework artists," like Ian Wilson and Raivo Puusemp, whose works are from the 1960s and 1970s?

KG: Well, it's not just a document from the past with Ian Wilson or Raivo Puusemp; for me they brought up questions that are still being posed today. An Ian Wilson work might ask the question "What is a discussion?" and "What are we discussing?" It's about the idea of the spiritual, the abstract, an understanding of the world beyond us—the unknown and the known, the absolute, very big subjects that you can implement within today's society. At the same time there is something eternal, and I really love this aspect, because a discussion is quite physical and at the same time very ephemeral. What do you remember of a conversation? Well, right now you are recording, but if you weren't, what would you remember? I think that's an important question, but to put it into perspective, that's why I juxtaposed three artists coming from different positions and backgrounds. These three positions are dedicated to understanding language and the body

of language and voice, and in a way respond to Wilson's work. They are in their early thirties or late fifties and the works for me are quite political. They're not "in your face," but are certainly about identity politics. They are about the idea of language because language and identity are one.

Adam Pendleton's work is about the unknown and representation—identity representation—which basically brings you back to poetry and language, the idea of constructed language. Also Pendleton, as an African American artist, invokes the idea of double consciousness; that is something he refers to. Paul Elliman's work is about our relationship to technology. He was born in London and then moved to Detroit as a young person when his father started working in the auto industry. His father soon followed a path taken by many engineers at that time, moving from cars to the emerging computer industry, and he worked until retirement as a production manager at Apple. It is interesting how you can have all those elements in an exhibition by starting with artwork from the late 1960s. With Raivo Puusemp, for me it was always the goal to bring the show to Estonia. He was born there but left at the age of three, so he doesn't speak Estonian, but rather sees himself as American. His practice is pretty radical, fueled by American conceptualism, so it is interesting to place that back into the context of Estonia today—which is why it was important to activate his work with five different artists from different generations, with different perspectives, but all with the common thread that they are engaged with understanding art, life, and politics. To give them this obscurity as a conversation is very much like the Ian Wilson project.

SK: I did notice those similarities right away. How did you come across Raivo Puusemp?

KG: At first thanks to Allan Kaprow. Kaprow was a close friend of Puusemp, as was Paul McCarthy. Kaprow wrote this book *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993), which has a whole section on Puusemp. Also, the artist Ben Kinmont, whose work I did a retrospective of, invokes a lot of obscure artists, one of whom is Raivo Puusemp. Kinmont made Puusemp part of a project called *On Becoming Something Else*, where he investigates artists who withdrew from the art context and then worked with chefs to make dishes based on their withdrawal. The recipes for him were metaphors—food and ingredients with respect to life and art. So I've been using those recipes, those seven biographies, step by step, thinking about how to make these practices visible in conversations today. So it's a very long project, and Puusemp is one of them. I've now done four out of the seven.

SK: Have you done previous projects with Puusemp?

KG: No, I've done projects with Ben Kinmont. *On Becoming Something Else's* seven biographies are of Bridget Barnhart, Lygia Clark, Hans de Vries, Gretchen Faust, GAAG (Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche), Laurie Parsons, and Raivo Puusemp. I've now done projects on Clark, de Vries, GAAG, and Puusemp.

SK: So you'll work your way through all seven?

KG: Yes, eventually. I started in 2011, and each project has had its own different outcome. They happen when I feel that they're necessary. For example with de Vries, I did an exhibition and book last year because I noticed a lot of artists felt very closely related to nature again. Which is something you mentioned in the last issue of *Estonian Art* magazine regarding "post-internet": this immense relationship to the digital, abstract world all of a sudden shifting to an understanding of life around us, and what fuels our daily lives, and how that has become important in art practices.

SK: Yes, in post-internet art there is this ubiquitous fern. I've been asking everyone, what does the fern mean? Is it the plant in the office, the symbol of something wild in a corporate environment? Nature and ecology are definitely recurring themes I've noticed recently. From the texts you've written and your interviews, you seem to have a taste for the conceptual; you are very involved with the philosophical underpinnings of things. When you curate an exhibition, do you go for emotion in any way?

KG: Yes, I do. I have to say, the shows that are up now are much more rational than any of the shows I've done before. Normally I'm pretty rational but I also let a lot of things go; I think the best exhibitions come when there is an X factor, moments where you just don't know. When I make exhibitions with artists, solo shows mostly, I intuitively connect things. And when I read reviews of the KW exhibitions, I see different understandings all the time, which is very beautiful, as it means that they allow a lot of space for thinking. I would say I'm very emotional in that sense, but it's true that I think a lot when I put things together.

SK: When I visited the Ian Wilson exhibition at KW, my first impression was that the artworks were hidden in plain sight. For instance with *Flesh* by the Norwegian artist Hanne Lippard, you had to wait until you were allowed to walk up the stairs—you were delayed in knowing what was up there, how long the work was going to be. This information felt withheld. Once you went up, you had to wait eight minutes before the show started, and you didn't have any way of knowing when you could subsequently come down. There was something maddening about it, something controlling. As I understand it, the piece is about language, and how language controls and creates barriers around us—and in that sense, the effect worked. It was this very structured environment where there were rules, and you didn't quite understand why the rules were there.

KG: Yes, and it's also to create a certain kind of concentration. The stairs relate to Ian Wilson's circles, because the circle is a spiritual understanding of time. There are many references to the circle, which Lippard uses in connection to spirituality, which is why it is a spiral staircase that brings you to a section of the gallery that normally doesn't exist. We built that whole platform. So you sit there, and you look outside the gallery into the gentrified area of Mitte, but it's also a little uncomfortable because the ceiling is low and you can bump your head, but when you sit, it's comfortable and then you're almost sitting outside but it's the audio that introduces the questions—very basic questions about life, posed by self-help programs, text messages, advertisements—Lippard uses many sources. Her voice is a generator of a lot of texts that she pulls from varied sources that together become, in a way, questions about time.

SK: What projects are you currently working on? Are they in any way a continuation of the Ian Wilson and Raivo Puusemp exhibitions, or are you moving in a different direction now?

KG: I am mostly involved with projects we have lined up for KW's program. The program is a constant continuation in that one exhibition bleeds into the next in order to tackle contemporary urgencies through the lens of the artists involved.

SK: What are the best and worst parts of your profession? What do you enjoy the most, what pains you the most?

KG: Honestly, I am in this business because it's my passion to present and share unique voices. In order to reach that goal, one sometimes has to jump through hoops.