

Conversation with PABLO DE OCAMPO, Western Front

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
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07.18.18

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PABLO DE OCAMPO,
Western Front

Pablo de Ocampo is Exhibitions Curator at Western Front, an artist-run center and exhibition space in Vancouver, Canada.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

What is your role at Western Front?

PABLO DE OCAMPO

My title is Exhibitions Curator. Within the whole of the Western Front there are three separate curatorial streams; it's changed in numbers over the years, but presently there are three. The others are the New Music Curator, and the Media Arts Curator. I, quite specifically, have the charge of the physical gallery space that we have. I develop the programming for the gallery and for any sort of auxiliary or ancillary programming that's happening alongside the gallery.

AK

What year was Western Front founded?

PO

1973.

AK

Can you tell us a little bit about its unique history and foundational members?

PO

Western Front was founded in the very early years of the artist-run center movement in Canada, which is a specific thing in Canadian art/art circles/art history. It was a movement that began in the late 1960s/early 1970s of artists trying to kind of take control of the means of exhibition-making, and taking it away from always being placed within large institutional contexts, large museums, or commercial galleries. The artist-run center is mostly focused

around the idea of artists taking control of primarily exhibition opportunities—but other artist-run centers have production mandates or distribution mandates or other things like that.

Western Front was founded by a group of eight artists who bought the building that we're currently still operating in. So, not only are we 45 years old, but we've been 45 years in the same exact space for the entire time, with minimal renovations here and there. Those eight artists were a diverse group of people in terms of their practices: they were people that came from visual arts backgrounds, people that came from movement choreography dance backgrounds, and people that had backgrounds or interests in music and architecture. The ethos of where those people came together or why those people came together was partially because there was a building they could buy really cheaply. They bought this building for CAD \$40,000.00 and thought, "We can live in there, work in there, and present work in there." Because it's a space that people have constantly been living in, it's been a constant experiment in thinking through—of living through—ideas of art and life and the grey area between those two things.

The other part that comes with the diversity of practices and what people were doing is something that we're always trying to find the right word for—multidisciplinary, or interdisciplinary, often seem inaccurate, or insufficient. What I like to kind of talk about is that it's been an experiment in disciplines being adjacent to each other or different types of practices being adjacent to each other. It's not so much about, "Okay, we've got a dancer, we've got a painter, and we've got a saxophonist." It's more about the fact that all these people were doing things, and sometimes those things collided, sometimes they were just happening all around. Western Front has always been a place where, one night there may be a gamelan concert, there may be a workshop with Steve Paxton, there may be a screening of some video, or there may be a performance; there could be any number of these things. And sometimes those things happen together in the same place at the same time. Those adjacencies are things that have, indirectly, had a slow way of influencing what happens here, I think.

TAUSIF NOOR

Do people still live in the space as well?

PO

Yes. Two of the original founders of Western Front still maintain apartments in the building.

TN

Amazing.

PO

Hank Bull, who wasn't one of the original eight but kind of started hanging around the Western Front in 1974–1975, very early on, has been living here for almost 45 years. And, Eric Metcalfe, who was one of the original purchasers of the building, has been living here continuously for 45 years.

AK

Do they still maintain ownership of it or did they transfer it over to an organization?

PO

Starting about five or six years ago an opportunity presented itself for some funding, through which a transfer of ownership happened. So now, Western Front as a non-profit society, has bought the building from the four remaining owners who were still the owners of the building. That finally took place maybe three years ago, so the Western Front organization will own the building in perpetuity. The four people that we bought it from—two of them, Eric and Hank Bull maintain residence in the building, and the other two, Jane Ellison, and Peter Bingham who are kind of from the dance trajectory at Western Front—still maintain work here. Peter practices here as a dancer in the dance studio all the time. Jane runs dance classes three or four times a week, throughout the year.

AK

In its original founding, did the different people who came together to inhabit the space all represent different disciplinary fields? Were those adjacencies built into the domestic aspect of it as well?

PO

I don't really know if I really have a clear answer to that one. My impression is that it wasn't quota based. It wasn't like they thought, "Let's get a group of people together." It wasn't like a Noah's Ark thing.

AK

No, of course.

PO

It was more like, these are the people around that have the means to drum up

a few thousand dollars to go in on the building together. And it was coming out of a number of other things that had been happening in Vancouver, groups that were working with video or different types of organizations. At that time Vancouver was really small and that's something that I kind of notice even now, when you go to cities or places with smaller arts communities, that it's not so compartmentalized. In the 1970s, things were really open. So, it was like the poets, the jazz musicians, the dancers, the painters, the video artists, they were all in the same room all the time.

TN

So, it develops sort of organically, but you've maintained that kind of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary ethos over time?

PO

Yes. I think there are a few reasons for that. One is that the artists that started Western Front came into it with a certain idea, which wasn't so much about multidisciplinary practices as it was about non-conventional practices, and fostering experimental practices, which, by default at that time, were really multidisciplinary practices.

Two things have really shaped it since, one being the architecture of the building. The owners had ideas about what could happen here, but in a way the building has facilitated what can happen here. There's space that can be carved out for a performance space, there's space that can be carved out for a dance studio, there's space that can be carved out for a gallery, and there's lots of domestic space. There are small rooms where people live, small rooms where people have studios, there's a kitchen. The weird architecture of the building has helped keep that type of practice alive.

The other factor is the way that the national arts funding in Canada works. Up until very recently, within the last two years, the Canada Council for the Arts ran under a disciplinary model. So, theater groups applied to the theater section, writers applied to literary arts, media artists, film, video people applied to media arts. From the way that I understand the history, the founders of the Western Front took advantage of the system. They were like, "Well, we're doing all these things. So, we'll apply to the visual arts section, and we'll apply to the media arts section." etc. The disciplinary breakdown of the funding bodies allowed this group of people that were doing lots of different things to pursue funding opportunities in a lot of different directions. Which would be different from an artist-run center that was more of a straight visual arts institution.

AK
Right.

PO

The spark was there, the intent and the idea were there, but it was also encouraged by a number of different outside factors.

AK
Did it always have a public-facing dimension to it? Was there always a gallery, for example, or performances that a public would come to?

PO

Yes, the gallery did not exist until the late 1970s, maybe 1980. It was about five or six years before a gallery was established. What is currently the gallery used to just be a bar, basically. It was an artist bar and there was art in the bar, but it wasn't open as a public gallery space. The performances were always open to the public, but, as Alex knows because she's been here, Western Front exists off of the main road. It's not a store front. It's a bit of a mysterious building. Prior to it being bought by artists, it was a fraternal lodge for a group called the Knights of Pythias. So, to a certain degree, the artists who bought the building were interested in that mythology of secret men's societies. They embraced some aspects of that sort of secret ceremonial society. It's not that Western Front wasn't necessarily public in the beginning, but it's always felt a bit like a speakeasy.

TN
Right. You have to be in the know.

AK
I like that.

PO

It's not like there's a sign outside with blinking lights that are like, "Art is in here."

TN
Right.

AK

I love that, because one of the things we've been asking other colleagues is, "Would you consider yourself an institution, an institute, or an organization?" But, I like to think of your answer as, "We consider ourselves like a speakeasy." That's great.

PO

Yes.

AK

That's awesome. You don't have a collection, correct?

PO

No.

AK

But you do have an archive?

PO

Correct.

AK

Can you talk a little bit about that?

PO

Yes. The archive at Western Front comes out of just circumstance, in a way. There were people here who were interested in video art and that was part of the practice, but in the first year or so of Western Front—I think it was even within the first six or seven months—there was funding that allowed Western Front to buy video equipment, a Portapak.

Two things kind of came out of that: one is the birth of our media arts program and a media arts residency, the other is an archive. It wasn't set up to be an archive per se, but one of the interests of the collective of artists around Western Front at the time—because they were so invested in non-traditional practices, and temporal performance-based practice—they had a video camera, and said, let's just point it at everything we do.

And so, by accumulation over years and years and years, our

media archive has collected video documentation of most everything that's happened here. Not everything, but a very large percentage of the things that have happened here. At a certain point in the institution's history, you look at all of those tapes and it's like, "Oh, this is really valuable, all this stuff." For performance art, for things like literary readings, poets who were either active in Vancouver or traveling through Vancouver in the 1970s. There's not a lot of video documentation of poetry readings from the 1970s out there in the world.

AK

Right.

PO

There's also lots of video documentation of music performances that were happening here through that time period. I think it's a question of why call it an archive, but it's an archive, it's not a collection. It's an asset and a tool for us to remember the institution, to think about what happens here, and it gets activated in different ways. It gets used for research of course, all the time, by people that are looking for documents, by or about or including specific artists, or that relate to certain art movements or histories. We look at it a lot too, either just for inspiration or for active programming.

There's been a lot of projects that have kind of developed out of the archive, whether it's artists that want to do research in there that end up creating work out of it, or curators are invited into it occasionally to make selections of work and do projects around it, whether that's programming or writing or other things like that.

TN

I saw that a lot of it is digitized and on the website, so there is a public dimension to that as well.

PO

Some of it is digitized.

AK

That was another question because archives can also become albatrosses, right? Do you have someone who is devoted to maintaining it and thinking about transfers, and how to migrate formats?

PO

We do, yes, for maybe the last eight years. I can't remember exactly when this came in, but it's within the last decade. There's been a concerted effort—I hesitate to say professionalize—but to professionalize the archive to a certain degree. We have an archivist who works here part-time, and she's part of a team that's been working over a few years, of different people that have been coming in to set up archival strategies and systems. This means organizing things, labelling things, cataloguing things, having a database that has pretty clear records of what's in it. With media work, that becomes complex in terms of, what's an original, what's a sub master, what's a transfer, when was the transfer made, what's the condition of the original, how was it transferred, all of that kind of information.

As things were being accessed over the years, a half-inch open-reel analog video tape would get dumped to MiniDV or get dumped to Beta or because someone needed it for something. Now, there's more of an archival plan in place. If we're going to pull an open reel video tape from a performance in 1979, that's going to get transferred in a very specific way, logged in a certain way, and handled with the archival-forward thinking practice of what that is and where it will go and how it will be accessed.

AK

In a sense, you're archiving the archive.

PO

At a time when this technology was becoming more and more archaic, we were having to send things elsewhere—so to access a tape that had not been previously digitized, or for which there wasn't a proper viewing copy, meant spending a lot of money by sending material to a lab and having them do it. So, something that was built into Western Front over the last four years, was to actually make an analog to digital transfer station in house. We can do in-house restoration and digitization of analog video tape.

AK

That's great. It seems, from very early on that there was a sense of wanting to document the things that happened at Western Front. That is not always part of a mission. Is there an overarching mission statement for Western Front?

PO

Yes, there surely is. “Established in 1973 the Western Front is one of Canada’s leading artist-run centres for contemporary art and new music. We produce and present visual art, exhibitions, new music concerts and workshops, media-art residencies, performance art and other artist-driven initiatives. The Western Front currently maintains programs in Exhibitions, Media Art, and New Music, as well as an extensive archive of audio-visual materials. Through this diverse programming we continue to be a crucial platform for interdisciplinary, experimental art practices in Canada and internationally.”

AK

How long have you been at Western Front?

PO

I’ve been at Western Front for four years.

AK

As the Exhibitions Curator is there much collaboration between the different entities that are under the umbrella of Western Front or are you in your own silo?

PO

A bit of both. There are streams of programming that go off on their own way. At times they converge together in certain ways. We’re having a lot of discussions about whether, or where and when, there should be collaboration. Should there be more of that, should we be encouraging that more? What we always come back to is this idea of adjacencies. I’m the Exhibitions Curator, I have a background in visual arts as an artist. I have more of a curatorial background in cinema, but I have much more broad-ranging interests across music, across dance, across other things. We’re really thinking a lot about how our team here is all cross-disciplinary, quite heavily in everything that we do. I think that a snapshot of any given project in any program stream might be indistinguishable in terms of like, who did this? Is this a music project? Is it a media project? Is it a visual art project? Not everything, but certainly some things.

AK

That’s great.

PO

There's a really big grey area in terms of what those are. I think that what we're talking a lot about is how to continue encouraging thinking across those lines from the more high level conceptual and broad thinking that we do as curators to how our publics interface with what happens in the gallery. For instance, thinking about language and how audiences are attuned to that. I could do a performance with artists such as Steffani Jemison and the composer Justin Hicks, and because it's kind of coming out of the tradition of a visual art practice, I speak about that work in terms of a performance. Justin, who's collaborating with Stephanie, works in a music context. The work that they do together and that they presented is a performance, as I called it, because that's the tradition that I'm working under, but it's indistinguishable from a concert. But, when something is labelled a "performance," it signals a certain sort of audience to go, "Oh, I want to pay attention to that." And, when something's labelled as a "concert," it signals a certain audience to sort of pay attention to that. We've been thinking a lot about institutional language and tone and voice, and how those things shape what it is that we're doing.

AK

That's great.

PO

A single project could really be any particular program's project, but it ends up getting presented as a certain thing because of the history that it's coming out of and the language that we're using.

AK

That actually leads me to a question about audience and who you think of as your audience and whether you think of there being multiple audiences perhaps because of these categories. Who is your community? Are they the same people as your audience?

PO

We certainly have multiple audiences, and I think that we consider that to really be a strength of what Western Front does. But for there to be a real diversity in the types of approach that the different curators take, it needs different audiences. The different audiences come out of historical trajectories of what has been happening at Western Front over a number of years, and those historical trajectories change and shift at different times. I've been here

for four years. The previous two curators to me in the exhibitions program were only here for two years. It's a constant state of change in those ways. But, the New Music Curator who recently left had been here for 25 years.

AK

That's a huge, huge history. Do you ever feel like you're competing with each other for audiences? Do you ever cross-program?

PO

No. I think that a diverse audience that's really coming from different backgrounds is an asset to us, but it's also a challenge. For instance, we recognize that there are a lot of people that come to Western Front to see Anthony Davis playing a solo piano concert, and there are other people who should totally be at that concert, but it's just not on their radar. Or Alvin Curran and Frederic Rzewski are here to perform, and I think my entire visual art gallery artists should be at that concert because it's like a mind-boggling opportunity in Vancouver, but not everybody thinks that way and it's hard to communicate how they view those things. So, as much as it's an asset to have all these different people that are supporting Western Front, it's also a challenge to think about how to keep cross-pollinating or breaking down the silos of who goes to what and why.

Certainly media art and visual art have a very big overlap. Music becomes this outlier that overlaps a little bit with those two audiences.

TN

Western Front in its name doesn't necessarily signal what the venue is, right? I think it's really fascinating because if you are drawing these audiences, there's a sense of being in the know. They know that Western Front is somewhere they can go for a concert. Other people might know it as a place to go to see a gallery show. Have you thought about the name and how that impacts these different audiences? How do they see Western Front, and what is their

perception of it?

AK

How did they come up with the name?

PO

I've only recently thought about the name. Partly through an artist named Maggie Grout who's doing a public art project that's about this building and the site of this building and the history of where this building stands and the future of it. In one of the documents that she unearthed—that she used in this artists publication that she made—she found a list of possible names for Western Front. Until I saw that, I never really thought about like, "Oh yeah, why did they call it Western Front?" The names on the list are all over the map. A lot of them are like way weirder than "Western Front" and there's a couple that seem to reference the art gallery of Ontario, in a really weird way. I think again, it's an oppositional stance. I have always sort of understood the Western Front to be about the specifics of Vancouver at that time in the 1970s. Vancouver was a very small place so this was really like an outpost.

What does it mean when you have a name that really is about a very specific time 45 years later? What does that name still mean? I have been asking myself that same question about you—because if you're the ICA, if you're the Museum of Modern Art, it's what's happening there. In a way, it's not, and it shouldn't ever really be obvious what's happening here. It should be continually surprising. I think the challenge of defining the founding principles of Western Front is for us to not say, "Oh yeah, it's a space that's about media art, and visual art, and music." But, it's to say, "Oh, this is a space where a bunch of people got together to really turn over and poke at and prod at what all these things were."

And so, we should not define ourselves by what they were physically doing. Producing video tapes, making performances, putting on concerts. But we should really be defining ourselves by that action of saying like, "Okay, we're going to take all these things and throw them in a bag and like see what happens." Or turn them inside out, or really try to push at the limits of what might be possible, what might be acceptable, what may be feasible within any number of those streams.

AK

Right. With that in mind, do you feel that the radical, originary moments are still embedded in the present or do you feel that you have really transferred

ownership over and entered a new phase? Is there a formalization of the organization where you're going back and thinking, "What are those radical underpinnings, and how do we kind of keep that energy alive?" Or is it more institutionalized in a way?

PO

I think in our best moments that spirit is there, but it's something to constantly strive toward and work for, and is not always achievable or attainable. Something that I've been thinking a lot about is centering our practice in radicality. That's one aspect of it. But, maybe on another level, stepping backwards is to really center it in that tradition of artist-run centers and what artist-run centers are doing in Canada. The radical practices that have flourished and that have been supported here are one way that really makes artists central to our programming, as is our ideology and approach to how the work gets manifested. That's a bigger question for me: what does it mean to be artist-centered, or focused on artists, rather than what it means to be supporting radical work.

AK

When did Western Front first start having employees? That seems like a big shift.

PO

It was organic for sure. I think everybody was getting compensated for things early on. But that changed from being like, "Oh yeah, here's 500 bucks," to people taking on titles. But, even when people took on titles it didn't necessarily mean that they were coming with a salary that was commensurate. It's complicated too because as the first crew of people that were running with Western Front were all people that were living here, the fact that they were living here was sort of their — not that it was their compensation — but it freed them to be able to do things that they wouldn't have been able to do if they were paying rent somewhere else and having to maintain a studio, maintain an apartment.

AK

Whereas you were recruited from elsewhere. You flew to

Vancouver to take the job at Western Front. That's a very different scenario than living in the house and going to work.

TN

With that in mind, something that I've been thinking about is, do you feel the weight of the institutional history? Does Western Front's history dictate, or perhaps, do you feel a pressure for it to dictate, how Western Front is run today? Is it possible to take new directions, given that some of the artists are still living in the house?

PO

I feel a fair amount of freedom in that. I distinctly remember being interviewed for this job and thinking a lot about history. I was coming out of a history that was really linked to experimental and avant-garde cinema specifically, which has a lot of weight and has a lot of baggage that I was really frustrated with at the time, which is why I was trying to do something different with my life. I remember Caitlin Jones, who's the Executive Director here, she said that she really was trying to align the institution to think about that history not as a burden, not this thing that's like strapped to us and an anchor that's like weighing us down, but, it's also not something to hide in the closet and never think about. When she said that, I remember thinking, "Okay, yeah. I'm into this place. This is totally where I want to be." I think that that's the thing: to just completely throw out history feels so irresponsible, and so blind to one's trajectory and one's lineage. But to always feel that you have to be in service to this thing that you're dragging around like a ball and chain, is obviously super limiting.

I feel like this institution, at least in its current incarnation, has really figured out a way to say, "You know, we're not going to throw out the archive, but we're not going to just sit around and look in the mirror and look back at what we did and dig through old boxes." We're trying to use that archive and that history as something to learn from, something to grow from. Something to study. Something that's a reminder of great amazing things that have happened or things that maybe didn't go great. What could you learn from mistakes in the archive or failures in the archive?

AK

It feels very synergistic with what we've been thinking about for this project—not resting on our laurels of past achievements, but really thinking about how to imagine other futures.

TN

Right. Has there been, or are there any plans for, something like an oral history, an official cataloguing of Western Front's history? I'm thinking here of larger institutions doing shows on artist-run spaces, or moments in the 1970s and 1980s, and it's very interesting to see these museums try to pin down the butterfly of these really dynamic, off-kilter spaces. When an institution can do that for itself, then it's a bit different, right? Are there any plans for documentation in a more formal sense?

PO

It's happened in the past for sure. I think at the 20-year mark or 25-year mark there was a publication that had essays as well as a program list organized chronologically of what happened here. Robert Filliou was staying here in August of 1973 and he met with these people and did these things, or someone came for a residency in 1975 and produced this video. I think we've talked a little bit about whether or not that's something that needs to happen. I think that it's in our centering of the archive over the last almost decade. It's sort of come out naturally in small ways. Some of the ways that we organize what's in the archive and how it gets digitized and preserved is by focusing on certain program areas. So, we can use that as a way to talk about what we're doing, but also maybe to bang around for some money and say, "Oh, we're preserving the literary history of Western Front" or something like that. In the last season there was a concerted effort to work on women's performance art in the archive, and documentation of that. It's not an all-encompassing thing, but it's something that looks at and thinks about and kind of brings up the past of the institution and puts it back on the surface. That manifested as a digitization project to transfer that analog video tape and digitize it and make

it available on the web with new annotations for the archive so that when those things are on the website they have much more extensive writing about what was happening and who was there. It's basically a web publication that was about this particular part of the archive. That's a pretty comprehensive one, but it's also just a single snapshot of a certain type of thing that's been happening at the institution.

AK

How is Western Front funded?

PO

We have three basic levels of funding in Canada for government funding that make up a large percentage of what we do: national, provincial, and city funding. That's the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia Arts Council, which is provincial funding, and then funding through the City of Vancouver. There's also a national funding body called the Department of Canadian Heritage, that funds our music programs specifically, but doesn't really fund other parts. But that's an annual operating funding that we get. There's one other thing provincially that funds our operations. All of those probably make up maybe 60 percent. I'm not sure exactly, but a very large percentage of the funding is coming from the government.

AK

With the remaining amount, do you go after grants or are there private donors?

PO

We have a couple of fundraisers a year. We have a small amount of private donations and we have earned revenue through ticket sales to concerts and through renting out our space.

AK

Do you charge admission and are there ticket sales for other events?

PO

For concerts, yes, but for things that are more like a lecture or a talk, generally no.

AK

Do you have a board?

PO

We do, yes. In the history of artist-run centers in Canada, one stipulation for artist-run centers was that your board needed to be a minimum of 50 percent artists, and we've maintained that.

AK

Are some of the original members on the board?

PO

No, of the original members, the two who are around and live here, the two who work here, they're just around. They're all not really involved in day-to-day operations, but we invite them into meetings. When we bump into them in the hall, we're like, "Oh hey, I was thinking about doing this, did anyone ever do this?" Or, "Did this person ever come here in the past?" Or, "I heard about this thing that maybe happened in the 1980s, can you tell me about it?"

AK

There must be so many stories.

PO

There are so many stories!

AK

How large is your organization?
How many people work there?

PO

We're about 12 full-time and part-time people. Additionally there's, you know, co-op placements through school and internships that happen that maybe add another three people here or so at a time.

AK

And you have a director who oversees it all?

PO

Yes, and for a number of years the organization ran in much more of a collective model. There was, I think, a six person co-directorship.

AK

Oh wow, that sounds complicated.

PO

That changed about nine years ago, and we have Caitlin Jones who was our first, and is our current, Executive Director. That's a recent milestone where it shifted to a more traditional institutional structure.

AK

I'm curious to hear a little bit more about your thoughts of how Western Front fits into the ecology of Vancouver and how that's changed over the years.

PO

I think one thing that's been consistent is that Western Front has always been something of a nexus or a meeting point, which is partly enabled by its semi-domestic structure and architecture. Because there was copious amounts of space that people could just hang out in and stay in—there were kitchens here and bathrooms, showers—Western Front has always welcomed people here to stay. For that reason I think it's always sat at this place where it's for and by and about the art community that's directly in Vancouver, but always thinking about placing that art community in dialogue with other people. In the 1970s and the 1980s, there was a large amount of exchange happening up and down the West Coast where artists from here were going all the way down the coast to L.A. and back up, meeting people between San Francisco and Seattle and Portland. A lot of it has happened between the cities in Canada, and between here and Toronto for sure.

A lot of it is inviting people in internationally, meeting people on travels. A number of the artist that were involved during the early years did spend a lot of time travelling around. They'd meet people in Indonesia or in the Philippines or wherever, and then be like, "Well, come to Western Front. There's a bed for you. There's a studio to hang out in and do work in." That kind of exchange has been really central to how we fit into the ecology in Vancouver.

AK

We were just talking about this because I did this show with Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) in the winter and we had a focus

on Ulysses Jenkins. There was a work that we showed here that was partially produced at Western Front. You've mentioned the media residencies, is there still an active residency program at Western Front? Is that something that's encouraged for people to take part in?

PO

Yes, absolutely. It's transformed of course because in 1973 nobody had access to that equipment. In those early years Mona Hatoum came to Western Front and made videos here because that was a unique opportunity. Nowadays, that's less the case. But we still try to make it a valuable and unique opportunity in whatever way we can. Residencies happen. Media residencies happen maybe four to six times a year, and they can really be anything. People can use a residency to produce work. They can use a residency to research work, and then we think a lot about what the unique benefit to the artist is in doing a residence or doing an exhibition here. What can this institution provide the artist that might be uniquely valuable or interesting or beneficial to them? There's an artist in Vancouver named Barry Doupé who primarily makes computer, digital, and video animations, and had never used a camera before in his life. A few years back, the Media Arts Curator at the time had approached him and was like, "Would you ever think about shooting a live action video?" And he was like, "Oh yeah, I'd love to do that, but I've never picked up a camera. I don't know how to do it." The curator told him, "Come do a residency. We'll show you how to use a camera. We'll supply you with equipment and a team and a crew, and you can try to realize something that's a live action video." That is a really unique example, but it is something that really harkens back to what I think the media residency was about.

We have a performance space that can double as a studio space, so if we timed it right, someone could book that for two weeks, build a set, and produce a work within that space. And that's a valuable use that people don't always have access to. Outside of that it's just really trying to bring a team that's trying to make things possible within the confines of what we have here. We're trying to really give time and space to it, rather than it be just a residency where you're here, you're doing own thing, and you don't really have any interface with someone. And that's useful and valuable in some ways, but this space is valuable in having a technical director and a curator and possibly another technician assistant available to just sit down and be like, "Alright, what are you going to do? How can we help you? How are going to make this thing happen?"

AK

That's so great. It sounds like there's also a convivial aspect that's made possible by the house that you're in. Do you think Western Front could exist without the building that you're in?

PO

In my experience being there I've kind of thought about that and been like, "Yeah, no, Western Front is this building." If this building wasn't here there wouldn't be Western Front. But, I don't know, that's just something that one would have to think about.

TN

With the media residency and the level of support it provides, are you looking for either emerging artists or younger artists or artists in their careers who are trying to do something new? What is your outlook for people that you want to work with?

PO

It can really be anywhere in that range, I think. The residency does have a particular way of supporting younger artists, just because of opportunities and resources. But the Scottish artist Luke Fowler did a residency a couple of years ago, and he was interested in making a film about one of the founders of Western Front. And that was kind of independent of anything, but then we asked, "Oh well, why don't you come here?" It goes back to that question, "How are we being artist-centered in supporting artists? How are we supporting, or helping or enabling that artist to do something?" One can do that for an emerging artist in one way, and one can do that for a more senior artist in another way.

AK

How many exhibitions do you do a year and how far out do you plan?

PO

We do five per year, and we're planning anywhere from two years to "we-

don't-exactly-know-when-this-is-going-to-happen." We sometimes plan years in advance, but then schedules shuffle, holds fall, and it's like, alright, "What are we doing in four months guys?" I think it's good to just value that and to not constantly be stressed about needing to have every little thing figured out. The scale of the institution that we're at is one that allows us to not have the short time scale be a crisis moment, but also to engage in projects where we're like, "I don't know when this is going to end."

AK

Do you pay artists?

PO

Absolutely. All the time.

AK

Canada is much better about that than the US. We just became W.A.G.E.-certified this year, and it's been a huge process that we're thinking a lot about.

PO

I know. It's central to working in the arts in Canada. Not to say that it happens in all instances, but for us, it's about the support of the artists. I often joke about my job, "Okay, how do I get as much of our resources as possible to the artists?"

AK

You have experience working outside of Canada, so is there anything that was surprising to you in working within the Canadian context, or is there something particular that defines that context for you?

PO

I think the funding just surprised me. I mean, it's really foreign.

AK

I was curious if it has had a different impact on your work.

PO

I remember the hustle about trying to get like \$3,000.00 from some small foundation. And, now I'm just like, "Wow, that's crazy" We're reminded by it at certain times. When we were in Gwangju a couple of years ago, I remember having lunch with another Canadian and someone from England and someone from New York. We were all in the middle of writing operating grants. The grant process came up, and the person from New York paused. She was like, "Wait a minute, so you just write a grant that funds your operations?" And, we were like, "Yeah, you just—do that." And she said, "You just do that every year and then you get money year after year?" And we were like, "Oh no, we only have to do it every three or four years."

TN

Must be nice.

PO

It was this thing where it took another 10 minutes of us talking, where then she interjected again, it was like, "Wait a minute. Let me just get this straight. You applied for the grant this fall, and then, you're just going to get a chunk of money for three years after that?" I am sometimes reminded that there is arts funding in a lot of places, it's just not in the United States.

AK

Just not in the United States. This kind of rosy picture you're painting, it sounds pretty ideal to me. Have you had any frustrations along the way? Are there certain challenges that are specific to the organization? Those don't have to be negatives; they can just be, part of your daily experience.

PO

I think that there's tension between honoring and recognizing and living with a history. How to live with it and live with it in the future, and imagine how it is in the future. I think all these frames of mind and points of view that I've been talking about in terms of what I think about Western Front are all active things that one just has to work at all the time.

AK

Right.

PO

None of them are things where it's like, "Oh yeah, we got that." Each time you answer a question it opens up another question. Each time you approach a situation or an idea with one solution it opens up an idea about another solution that might be more effective. It's a constant kind of working with how to live in that space and do those things.

TN

Given the cognizance of that history, do you think there is an intergenerational dialogue when you bring in younger or emerging artists? Do they want to interact with history of Western Front?

AK

Or maybe, has Western Front naturally built in an intergenerational conversation?

PO

It definitely happens. Particularly when people are coming and creating work specifically here. It happens a lot that artists will, at the very least, if someone's here in residence for a little while, they'll spend a lot of time just talking to some of the original founders. Just because they're around the building and they meet them, and they're chatty and they talk about stuff. Maybe it doesn't really directly influence their work, but at other times, you know, if someone is looking for it, it might. Maggie Grout was doing this thing about the building, and Jimmy Robert came here to do a show and did a performance that was really about the relationship of movement to visual practices. He talked really directly to one of the dance artists that is an original member of Western Front.

The opportunities present themselves for that to happen all the time, and sometimes it's very loose and indirect and sometimes it's really about a specific inquiry that an artist wants to make that needs to engage with the history, that needs to have them in dialogue with either an individual or with looking at video tapes.

AK

We asked you about the specificity of working in Vancouver ,but I'm curious, of who you think of as your peers—

this could be both conceptual and actual. Who do you feel that Western Front is in dialogue with?

PO

I think that there's institutional affiliations and then a lot of those institutional affiliations are really just who the people at the institution are friends with and hang out with. There's a gallery in Toronto called Gallery TPW and the curator there, Kim Simon, was a close collaborator of mine when I lived in Toronto. Moving here has actually been really great to have a dialogue across cities because Canada is way bigger than the U.S., and there are fewer major cities, so the dialogue between cities doesn't come as naturally as it does in the States. The cities are already siloed. People in Toronto have no idea what happens here and vice versa. SBC Gallery in Montréal would be a peer, and the director there, Pip Day, is a friend of mine who I've known for a while. There are lot of similar ideas, similar questions, and those relationships are sometimes as simple as like, "Pip, I'm in the middle of hiring someone right now," and Pip and I were talking about hiring and she was like, "Oh, I have this really great exercise in an interview, I'm going to send it to you." Or she'll call to talk to me about programming that we developed together or shared together or work on together. It can be any of those things.

AK

That's great. It's wonderful to think about it being relational as opposed to institutional. One thing that I was really struck by, in Canada, which seems different from mainstream culture in the U.S., is the privileging of First Nations discourse. Has the specificity of the conversation in Canada come into your work, or was that a learning curve that you had to familiarize yourself with?

PO

Yes and no. I grew up in the American Southwest that has maybe a dialogue that one might not have if they're growing up in Pennsylvania or in Vermont or somewhere. Not that there's not an Indigenous population in those areas, but it's less visible than it is growing up in Arizona or New Mexico or Oklahoma,

since all of those populations across the country were forcibly migrated out to the West. And so, the concentration of people is greater there than it is on the East Coast of the United States. I moved to Canada at the beginning of the current wave of a different kind of approach to how First Nations artists are interfacing and being included within contemporary art institutions; I've been here through a trajectory. Not to say that they weren't here before that, but just a second wave of it is cresting now in a really big way. There was a New York Times article about Rebecca Belmore in a show in Toronto this weekend. That's fucking insane.

AK

On an institutional level in Canada, it's just a very different context. There's at least been a decision in the country to talk about the contributions of First Nations peoples and their visibility. It's not to say that a First Nations artist might not be present in the US in certain regional aspects, but it seems just that there has been a decision in society that it is going to try and be more inclusive.

PO

I was in the States in June, and having these conversations with institutions that were wrestling with it, and with some Indigenous artists who live in the States and their experience in the environment we were in. It's easy to say that it's super great in Canada, and it is way better here, but it doesn't come without its problems. To go back to what's challenging, it's similar to what I was saying about what's challenging about being at Western Front: it's not work that you undo or solve in simple and easy ways. It's a constant struggle to be able to think about those things. In a way it's very similar here to think about other communities in the United States and think about the presence and the visibility of Black artists in institutions in the United States. There's been certain things that have changed that have been really amazing, but it's also still frustrating and difficult.

I think people are still figuring it out. There's still a lot of places where it's not so binary. Something might happen in an institution that people, regardless of what their identity is, critique it one way or another and the way to think about it might be, "These people screwed this up, but these other people screwed this thing up too, and everybody's coming at this from the

wrong angle.” We need to have a reset and rethink how we’re doing this work.

AK

We’re quite familiar with the structural problems in the United States and we like to think, “Oh, it’s so much better up north.” You can’t just wipe away centuries of oppression and bloodshed—as you said, it’s just racist in different ways here.

PO

It manifests itself in different ways. I think that the challenge is that these are systemic things that take systemic changes to happen. Systemic changes aren’t something you chart out really and make a plan where you’re like, “Okay, we’ll we do, A, B, C, and D and then we’re there.” They’re incremental and cumulative and slow, and they require a commitment to what is often at odds sometimes with how funding works. You want to tell your funders that you’re doing something specific, but sometimes to be able to say, “Oh, well we did this show with a First Nations artist,” to your funder is counterproductive to what you actually need to be doing. It’s getting to the point where you don’t actually need to say that; we’re getting to the point where that’s not a box that you’re checking off. You need to be transforming the way that you think institutionally.

AK

Right, exactly.

PO

That’s the hard work that I’m super interested in here, and I’m speaking about that in terms of this topic, but also in terms of any other topic. How do you change the way an institution thinks? You change it through the way that individuals think. It’s having to recognize myself as an individual in a certain position of power and control in an institution, and the various predispositions, assumptions, and blind spots that I have. How do I condition myself to work through and change those things?
