

Conversation with
ROB BLACKSON,
Temple Contemporary

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
of Contemporary Art,
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Rob Blackson is the Director of Temple Contemporary at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, PA.

With Alex Klein and Gee Wesley

ALEX KLEIN

Can you talk a little bit about first coming here and your decision to come to Temple? What was happening in Philadelphia when you got here and what changed after you arrived?

ROB BLACKSON

When I moved here in 2011 there was a show by a group called Lead Pencil Studio. I got the sense that it was a bit of a transitional exhibition. Lead Pencil went into the former Temple Gallery curatorial office and cast with tinfoil different objects that were in these various rooms that Temple was no longer renting.

It was this sort of shadow or residue in some respects of what these offices and gallery spaces used to be. It was very much walking into a ghost, really, of what Temple Gallery had been and then, in many ways, trying to enliven this new space with that old spirit.

There was this sense of trying to continue on with what was before, artistically and creatively, but I also noticed that there was a sheer cliff in terms of the participation of the students, and you can understand why. At the time, Temple Gallery was in Old City amongst the numerous other galleries that are down there.

AK

So there was no connection to campus?

RB

Right, no physical connection. Then the idea was to consolidate the gallery

downtown [Temple Gallery] with the Tyler School of Art at Elkins Park in one new gallery that was built here in the new building at main campus.

So that sounded great on a lot of levels, but I think what we saw happening [with this consolidation] was that the students would come through for the openings and then feel as though they'd seen the show. We have an audience walking past the door virtually every day in the hundreds, but for them, it was no longer of interest because they had been here for the grape juice and the cheese and thought they had seen it, so why come back?

At this time, around 2009–10, there was an effort to revitalize an audience, finding ways to connect exhibitions with a film series, to bring people in on their lunches. Audience attendance was kind of abysmal. The year I got here, 2011, there were maybe 1,200 people through that first season, and I saw that a traditional exhibitions program was a tough sell. This is the biggest room in the building and people aren't coming into it. So, I looked around me to try and think okay, so what's the dynamic that could be created with this space and the context of this building and the neighborhood surrounding it? If I'm really going to open that up and try to make that context of being in the city and being an urban campus engaging, it's not just going to be my skillset as a curator of contemporary art that's going to be able to activate the space.

I simply don't have enough knowledge to foster a viable hub, a meeting place for all those different interests. Moving counter or maybe anti-curatorial to what I've been taught, it needed to be more than just one authorial voice. That's when I created the idea for an advisory council which is comprised of about 35 people: High School students of color who live in the neighborhood, Temple students from nearly every school and college at the university, faculty, and civic/cultural leaders from across the city—all different kinds of people.

The high school students I mentioned are called our Youth Advisory Council and they come on a weekly basis and get paid through a grant from the Philadelphia Foundation to enact programming that's created by them. So, there's generations of interest, if you like. But all of the programming, whether it's from the Youth Advisory Council or from the other strata of the Council, comes from hopefully a point of unknowing.

The Advisory Council meet once a year, and their only homework assignment is to come with a question that they don't know the answer to. I wanted to do that because in the rhetoric of academia, it's often only the questions that people already know the answers to that get asked. So in this way, whether it's questions about menopause or questions around soil or the disinvestment of public school education or the state of our housing stock in Philadelphia... These are the questions, which previously I had probably next to no interest in that all of a sudden become my curatorial charge.

AK

And that determines the program for the year?

RB

The advisors vote on the questions they've raised in the meeting that they feel have the greatest local relevance and international significance and, based on the outcome of their votes, I slice up the pie of the budget and the space and the research resources we have. It's very different from what I've done previously, which was more of like "Oh, I've just been to this great opening or artist's studio and I think we need to bring that artist back here." It's a very different kind of model and it's often not me that determines what it is that we're showing. As much as possible I put a moratorium on PowerPoints and instead say "We've got the climate control, we've got the art handler, we've got the shipping connections, what is it that you would like to show to address this question that has been raised?"

Because most of our audiences are students and artists they're quite a tactile, visual bunch. Many of our students have sat through PowerPoints all day. That's not the way we're going to touch on them. A good example would be Rob Lugo, who came and spoke quite recently. He's from Kensington, a ceramicist. Usually it'd just be "Okay, here's your PowerPoint, we're done." But in this case we got ceramic pieces from him, put them in the space for a number of weeks until the audiences became a bit numb to them, and by then more events will have happened in the space and we rotate Rob's things out to make room for more events and their residue ephemera.

AK

To back-track a little bit, when you first got here, was there a rhythm of exhibition cycles?

RB

They lasted for two or three months.

AK

And my understanding is that you took that budget and you thought about how that budget could be implemented in a different way, right?

RB

Yes. It wasn't going to make sense if we were interested in actually having

the conversation with more than just me and my sock puppets. So we don't have an exhibitions budget anymore.

AK

Do you think of yourself as the chief curator, the director...?

RB

Definitely. Opening up the space to more inclusive conversations and programming wasn't going to make sense if the exhibitions were just going to come from my own interests (I'm a 42 year old, white, straight guy).

AK

Do you think of yourself as the chief curator, the director...?

RB

No. I'm the guardian of the ethos for Temple Contemporary. So I set up this model for the Advisory Council structure and I just try to protect it. At the moment, when the council is interested in arts and music education across the school district of Philadelphia, I apply myself and my staff to creatively reimagine that question in a way that would be beneficial to a wider audience.

AK

Who do you see as your immediate audience and how does that dictate who is on this council?

RB

I'm a firm believer in the statement that if you shape an event with the interests of everyone in mind, no one will come. The immediate audience is really scattered because it doesn't fall into the same trenches or paths that I've seen in other places where I've curated. I don't see the same faces every time. Instead, for example, last week we had the Mayor of Ithaca come here. That mayor is leading the national conversation around solving the problem of heroin addiction. People who were interested in, for that conversation, having safe-use needle facilities for heroin, guys like Max Tuttleman, will come along to that conversation. It's a very different kind of way in which people tend to get interested in specific topics for specific reasons and come for that and many times never come back—because we might not be doing another thing on heroin addiction in the near future.

AK

So your audience is in constant flux in some way. But then you have your core, I'm assuming, demographic of students.

RB

They basically turn up when we bring through people like Susan Cahan or Julia Bryan-Wilson, Martha Rosler or somebody like that, where the students are like "Yeah, that's my game." They'll show up for their team, basically.

AK

How do you decide who's on this committee, the advisory board?

RB

It began with me just interviewing a ton of people, I think sixty people the first time through. It's exhausting. But now, it becomes a little bit by word of mouth. I say to our current list of advisors, "Okay, this is your last meeting. By next year we need to have someone fill in your seat. Give me a couple names."

AK

How many people work with you? Is it just you or do you have staff?

RB

There's myself, there's Sarah, and there's Adam. Adam's our technician. So those are the three full-time, and then we have three graduate assistants that work through the term. They're here for 20 hours a week. It seems almost counterintuitive, but thankfully audiences have gone up. This past year we had 17,000 people come through.

AK

That's a lot. That's great!

RB

It's a lot for a staff of three.

AK

That's a lot for a staff of three and it's a lot for a location that's on a campus.

RB

And to respond to that as well, a lot of it has to do with the partnerships we can create because of this context. So, for example, when we had Ta-Nehisi Coates come in, those kinds of things happen because of a partnership with the university and sometimes with people in different parts of Philly. In that respect, it's a bit of a moveable feast because we're not exhibition-centric, we're more questions-driven. So we don't tend to have to say, "I'd love to work with you, Ta-Nehisi, but it's not going to fit for this time period because we're doing this other thing." We don't have that conversation very often, thankfully.

AK

Here's a question that hadn't occurred to me until you just said you weren't exhibition-centric. Do you see yourself as art-centric?

RB

No

AK

That leads me to my next question, which is how you decided to rename it to Temple Contemporary. How do you define what the "contemporary" is?

RB

We're not art-centric as much as we're curiosity driven. I had no idea we would be doing this "adopt an instrument" program right now as part of our Symphony for a Broken Orchestra project. I think in creative learning, as long as you're following the question and truly trying to creatively reimagine that question, you're only limited by your own ignorance.

Thankfully because of the advisors that we have—and they have such a wide range of knowledge—it helps make me less dumb, to know what to respond to and how to respond to it. In that respect, it almost seems counterintuitive to think of it just as an art space, because there's not always ways that we can respond in that capacity. It's kind of quirky for people like the Mayor of Ithaca to come through and be like, "Oh, I've never spoken at an art gallery before. This is kind of fun." You get a slightly different kind of conversation than if you were in a lecture hall. The same can be true for meals that we do here or games or workshops or rallies, and all that kind of stuff.

AK

So things might accrue over time, but that's different from an exhibition. It's like following a thought.

RB

That's right. A lot of the stuff we try to do is on wheels. So as big audiences come in, we can move the stuff so we can do other things.

The naming of Temple Contemporary came about because I was trying to come up with a terminology that would reflect the sense that hopefully something could be made two centuries ago or two weeks ago and that doesn't change its potential relevance to today.

I wanted to put that in the forefront of people's minds. For us, it's again coming back to that initial mission statement of local relevance and international significance. Everything that we do at some level has to have that sense of relevance.

AK

Putting Temple in the name also grounds it in the space in which you're located, too.

RB

That had to be. I wasn't going to be able to just...

AK

Just call it whatever. But that's actually kind of nice though, because it also just says this is actually a physical place.

RB

It's a physical place. Sometimes I question the necessity of the physical place. But in terms of, again, rooting it in a public education facility, there is the idea that it's public interest that allows this place to stay afloat. In that respect, it's a good way to reference our foundation in public education that all of our events are free. That's a way in which we're continuing with that legacy. And it's no accident that I had come here from Britain, where I had just worked at a place called Nottingham Contemporary. I saw what at the time was this arc of institutions that were thinking in this way. But when I came to Philadelphia, that wasn't in the language.

I also undertake this whole initiative of Temple Contemporary with the

understanding that this is an art school. It's committed to new and interesting ideas, so that when I leave, there very well could be a new director who says, "That was Rob's model for what he wanted to accomplish..." But as the will of an art school, it may very well get ripped up so that something new can be created.

AK

That's actually one of our questions, which is how dependent is Temple Contemporary on you? Is it a model, or is it an institution, or an organizational structure?

RB

I see it as a model. I mean it's not a year-round model either, for the most part. We're kind of like those old Documenta, like we're a hundred-day event, really. That's what Szeemann originally modeled for Documenta. From that point of view, it's something that is going to last from the end of August through the beginning of February.

AK

That's really nice too, because maybe that also prevents exhaustion on some level. I see how much you do and I imagine that you have to be here for all of these hundred-day events. So there has to be an element of it where you're able to actually take a break and regroup.

RB

Through this model we can pace ourselves and regroup in February. The Council meets in January. We've already given our laundry list of homework assignments and then we begin that process so that when we hit the ground in August we have a sense of forward direction.

AK

Right. The kind of institution that we work in at ICA, there's never really a break. Frankly, that was one of the reasons that Excursus

had to stop. There's no chance to regroup. It's just going, going, going, until you fall off the cliff. I was really interested that Raven Row just announced that they're going to take a year to press pause. There's something to be said about taking a break, or shifting the kind of work every few months.

RB

And organizations that don't have a site (although Raven Row does) can follow more of a seasonal, humane way of working that's responsive to our energies and to our interests—more so than the inevitable treadmill of the institution.

AK

Of the art world.

RB

We all see it. In October, everything gets ramped up and then by the end of this season there's a little bit of a lull after Miami. There is a bit of an arc there, but it is helpful to have the regimentation of the academic year to say, "Okay, we need to do thesis exhibitions because otherwise they're not going to graduate." And the only room we have is this one, so this is where they're going. As clouding as it is of our inevitable message, there is a sense that we can sort of change for a second and be something else for a while.

AK

How much of your mandate is that you work with the students and their thesis shows?

RB

It's pretty light. We set up the space. We do a lottery system so that all the students get their shows whenever their number comes up. But, in many respects, the students have been working with faculty advisors since the time that they started at Tyler. So, by the time they're a second-year MFA student with their show up, they will have already developed a rapport and a comfort level with their faculty advisors that then directs how it is that they install their MFA show.

AK

So much of what museums display relies on questions of expertise or authorship. It's really interesting that you're flipping it and saying, "This might be something I don't know about and I'm proceeding with this exploratory kind of way of moving forward," which is a very different way than, "And now I'm going to tell you what this is."

RB

I've got no chops to say what something is anymore around here, which is a great spot to be in, because I'm in a position where I'm actually learning. When Laura Sullivan came in a couple weeks ago and talked about the way in which the water filters in Flint are no longer working and why that is, I had no idea. I learn a lot here.

AK

One thing I'm personally interested in is thinking about where the artist's studio, the academy and the institution rub up against each other and maybe do something a little different. And it seems like you're working in a kind of way that the students or the community are able to come in and learn something in a different manner than they would on campus.

RB

It's also a chance to think about the context of this place, as somewhere that's quite privileged and gratifying, in a sense. Ebony Patterson is an artist who we've been working with for the past two years. She wanted to make a piece and we have the tools and the things here to do it. In that respect, for her it was like a toy box that she could open as an artist, get a reasonable fee on, and at the same time come out with a new piece of work that wouldn't have been possible for her if she had just been going through her continual or habitual ways of working. So that was quite fun.

AK

Do you support residencies?

RB

Well it was ten nights of hotels. I think "residencies" is a lovely term, but it's becoming like two nights in a hotel is my "mini residency," and I don't really think we're there yet. There may be moments like this in the future where we can take more of an active role, putting a visiting artist with students in a classroom or in Temple Contemporary to create something new.

AK

Does all of your funding come from Temple, or do you have to fundraise outside of Temple as well?

RB

It depends on what I'm doing. If it's buying paper clips and making sure the MFA shows go off okay, Temple provides that money. If I want to create a "symphony for a broken orchestra" that's going to involve the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Curtis Institute of Music, the Boyer College of Music and Dance, the Black Pearl Orchestra, and it's going to fix 1,300 instruments owned by the School District of Philadelphia, Tyler doesn't have the budget.

AK

So you have a core operating budget that they give you and then you go out elsewhere to be able to do the programmatic things that you want to do. You mentioned at the very beginning that you weren't sure that having a building was a good thing. How dependent or not dependent on architecture is Temple Contemporary? Could it be something that roves around? If you didn't have to be on campus, what would it look like? Where would it be?

RB

I think it might be on campus at different times, but it's really more the

expectation—the expectation that people are going to walk into a gallery and they’re going to see an exhibition. It’s a hard thing to ask people to think about something differently. For example, to think about their capacity to adopt any of the instruments that they’re currently looking at, to get on their phone and pick one, pay a hundred bucks and have that instrument be fixed and then go back into a kid’s hands. That level of, I hesitate to use the word engagement, but just caring. Because going to an exhibition space is such a passive experience.

I often think that this space, and the expectations that it offers me, work against me. Do you know what I mean? I don’t know. Maybe it looks like a food truck. Maybe it looks like a rec center, maybe it looks like a library, maybe it looks like a safe injection needle site one day a week.

What I’m learning is that this space—as much as we want to embrace that Duchampian understanding that the ready-made, the art thing, could be anything—at the same time, I don’t think we’re quite there yet with letting the gallery be anything. That’s a problem.

GEE WESLEY

You mentioned that you’re a guardian of an ethos. Has that ethos of Temple Contemporary evolved in the time that you’ve been here? What would it be if you were to have started Temple Contemporary today?

RB

Right. I’m struggling for a way to let that ethos be immediately understood. I’m wondering if the evolution of that ethos may require a new way to communicate what that ethos is and how it is that we have come to this point in our development.

GW

Are there a set of frustrations and challenges that have gotten in the way?

RB

People power is big. And the university is a great resource in so many ways. But, for example, I don’t have a development office. We don’t have a communications office. There’s an infrastructure that you have to fill in to be able to do the larger projects. Just in terms of getting people through the door and trying to get as many of them as we can a true understanding of

what it is this place can offer.

GW

Are there peer organizations that you're in dialogue with, or conceptual peers that you're looking to?

RB

There's a vitality, in a "rip it up" kind of way that Machine Project has had at different times throughout its history. That's been helpful for me to see. I'm a fan. I also think there's something about hardware stores, where you see something curious on the wall and you kind of can guess what it's for, but you don't really know. I'm trying to get to this place so that whether it's an art object or a thing from the hardware store, that it sparks that curiosity that people actually do want to question a little bit. Because that's in line again with the ethos.

AK

Where are you in your own relationship to Temple Contemporary? Is it something that you still feel vitalized by? Is it still something that energizes you, or are you starting to feel tired?

RB

I get tired usually around the second week of October. But by now I'm cool. I'm like, "Okay, yeah, it's all right. I can do this."

AK

Is it something that you still feel like you are deeply committed to and something that you want to keep doing for a long time? Or is it something that you see having a trajectory to it?

RB

I don't know how to answer that. Thankfully, we've done some things that have proven memorable and meaningful for the city. The reason I've been able to do Temple Contemporary is because the art school has given me that legroom.

But I wonder what institution other than an art school like Tyler would give me this much leeway. Like, “You want to have a funeral for a home in a neighborhood nowhere even close to us, and our logo isn’t on it? What?” or, “You want us to fix every broken instrument in the school district?” But through all of this, thankfully, they are able to see the long term social and educational benefits of this approach and are just as excited as I am. It’s a pretty unique situation.
