

Conversation with
JOÃO MOURÃO AND
LUÍS SILVA,
Kunsthalle Lissabon —
Part III of III

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,
University of Pennsylvania

Support for the research and development of *I is for Institute* has been provided by Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. © 2017–18 Institute of Contemporary Art. All rights reserved.



10.15.16

Conversation with
JOÃO MOURÃO AND LUÍS SILVA,
Kunsthalle Lissabon — Part III of III

João Mourão and Luís Silva are the co-directors of Kunsthalle Lissabon, a contemporary art institution located in Lisbon, Portugal.

With Alex Klein and Gee Wesley

ALEX KLEIN

You were talking a little bit about how you make relationships public through the exhibition, but then you concretize them through the publication or the seminar.

Yes.

AK

Can you talk a little bit about the role of the books you produce?

LUÍS SILVA

LS

We started the books because exhibitions are ephemeral. You know, they last three months and then they're gone. You may have the documentation on your hard drive or in your backup. It's there when you need it, but it's not made public. It's not made visible. On the one hand, we wanted to make visible what we've done. We also wanted to make visible not only the research that we were doing, but bring other people into the discussion. And that's why we started commissioning people. For example, in Volume 1, people whose writing or whose thinking had been influential to us such as Maria Lind and Charles Esche who were very active in the new institutionalism, which for us was very interesting, but it was obvious that it wouldn't work.

AK

And it's a different generation.

LS

It could never work. No wonder it ended because, you know, what they were achieving was so radical that it couldn't last. It didn't make any sense. We wanted to bring them into the discussion. We just wanted each volume to do three things: to define the status quo of the institution as this ever-changing entity; we wanted to make explicit that what Kunsthalle Lissabon is today is going to be very different from what it was two years ago because it keeps changing. Even though the mission remains the same, the way of instituting is different, the conditions are different, the outcomes are different. Everything is different. We are different. What kind of artists that we want to work with changes. Everything changes.

AK

Of course. Everything changes.
Your taste changes.

LS

We wanted to make that explicit. We also wanted to make visible and make a little bit more permanent each exhibition that we've done. We wanted to bring in people to discuss it with us. That's what *Performing the Institution(al)* is. The title is the original idea, to perform an institution, but then what does it mean to perform an institution when we are actually performing the institutional? And the institutional is very different from the actual institution. It's this kind of way of operating, this specific way of engaging with the community, as opposed to the institution, which can be seen, you know, as the actual thing. We were trying make people aware of the difference between the two. Which are very different things. Unfortunately, the play on words only functions in English. We could not make that happen in Portuguese. It's thinking practice through practice. Practice was, at least for us, a way to show you how we do things. And how, then, discussion feeds into it.

AK

Of course. And I would say every meal that we've had together, even just standing together and talking, chit-chatting in the downtime in the installation, produced a whole other set of questions, such as: Do you ever do artist talks? Do you ever make these things public in that dimension? You had a particular response to that. And then it led

to your discussion about what Simon Sheikh's proposal was.

LS

I think we always thought of a public program as part of Kunsthalle Lissabon. We've done a few things. We had Elena Filipovic come for a talk. But it's a lot of work to organize. Almost as much work.

GEE WESLEY

It's like an exhibition in some ways.

LS

The public program is something that we thought could be very interesting and very relevant, specifically if we connected it to questions related to curating, which is a topic that is still not very developed locally, or again, institutional knowledge or institutional practice, which are completely undeveloped. Simon Sheikh is someone who has been very influential to what we've done and with whom we've collaborated on a few occasions, and one of our plans is to publish his selected writing. We approached him and he said yes and we started working on the book. For funding reasons, we put it on hold and it has been on hold for two or three years, which is a shame. But as part of that ongoing discussion, Simon Sheikh approached us and told us that he would like to be appointed head of public programming. And he wanted to do so in a very mainstream, professional way with an e-flux about him being appointed. And he wanted the whole world to know that he was head of public programming at Kunsthalle Lissabon.

JOÃO MOURÃO

He was really committed.

LS

This performative gesture, he wanted to perform it a step further. You know, being appointed and informing the world that he had been appointed head of public programs. He had a really nice public program dealing with the institution, of course, and it was a yearlong program that we would develop in three moments with three different sets of guests discussing the institutions in three different ways. That never happened because it was the year we lost all funding. But it was very interesting.

GW

What year was that?

I can't remember.

LS

2013?

JM

2013 or 2014

LS

AK

Wait, you lost all funding in 2013?

Yes.

LS

GW

So just a few years ago?

AK

No funding at all?

No funding at all.

JM

We got 100 percent cut.

LS

AK

What happened?

We had a right-wing government whose first measure was to terminate the Ministry of Culture.

LS

So that year, there was no funding.

JM

But it wasn't just us.

LS

AK

And was that really felt in the city?

LS

Yes, of course. Of course. It was a disaster.

AK

It must have affected your professional lives too.

LS

The city kind of needs to balance out the lack of funding. A public program is something that we would really like to do. We're just understaffed.

JM

Yes. Understaffed and under-budgeted.

LS

But I think we could squeeze in a talk every now and then.

AK

Returning to my question, you have talked about the artist talk as something that you aren't particularly interested in doing.

JM

Yes, we're more interested in the curatorial discussion.

LS

But also sometimes there is this need for artists to talk about their own work as self-mediation. To us, that is a bit weird. What the artist does is the exhibition. It's the solo exhibition. To ask the artist to talk about his or her own work feels a bit weird. That should be our task as mediators. That should be the role of the exhibition text or whatever.

GW

I see.

AK

Which isn't to say that artists can't participate in a discussion.

LS

No, of course not. But are we reifying the artist's own words when the artist claims that the work in itself is not enough?

AK
Right.

GW
Right. Interesting. That's very good. It seems a bit weird because the work should be enough.

AK
What are some of your biggest frustrations with the Kunsthalle Lissabon? Because literally you've created your own space, right?

JM

One of the frustrations, not having the book of Simon Sheikh already.

LS

True.

JM

That's a big frustration.

AK
Funding issues?

LS

Funding issues.

JM

It started with funding issues and then, once you put something on hold...

LS

Yes. But it gets really disrespectful. Because we approached him and then we started working on it and then silence. So that's something that we really should commit to next year, if he still wants to do it. He's such a nice guy and it would be so important for Kunsthalle to publish that book.

AK
I guess one other thing that I was thinking about is what it would be like if you were to start

Kunsthalle Lissabon today in the current context?

LS

Oh my god.

JM

Ooh.

LS

I have no idea. I don't know how to answer that questions.

AK

It's the first stumper I've thrown out there.

LS

I don't know, because we were responding to a specific set of conditions.

AK

Right. Could Kunsthalle Lissabon be formed in today's current climate?

LS

I don't know.

JM

I don't know. We're different people now.

LS

We were different people back then.

GW

And if it was formed today how would it be different?

JM

I really don't know that either.

LS

I have no idea. That is tough.

JM

Not the same, for sure. We would not have found a space for free now.

AK

Is it urgent in the same way?

LS

No, no, no, no, no, no.

JM

No, no, no, no.

LS

No, he gave a great answer. It would be so much more difficult to...

JM

To start something.

LS

Because of tourism. Because there are no empty spaces.

AK

So the crisis really helped in some ways.

LS

Definitely. But it would be so hard for us to find an empty space for free today. Because even if it's empty and even if no one rents it, then there is this mindset that...

JM

Someone else will take it.

LS

I may be making money with this in two months' time. We had to have a space in order to start Kunsthalle Lissabon. That was the first condition. We didn't want to do a nomadic project. It had to be anchored to a specific location, a space, even though we have changed a few times.

AK

But the architecture's important for you.

LS

The architecture has been important. It has defined what kind of projects we can show.

AK

That leads me to a question about site-specificity. I'm really curious about how you work with and against the notion of the "site-specific."

JM

Yes, for us it's more than the place. I think we haven't been that worried about site specificity. It's about working with the artist and then we see what's going on from there.

AK

Right. But it's not necessarily about an artist coming to Lisbon and reacting to these things.

LS

No, God no.

AK

Which is a model within the contemporary art world, right? Artists go from residency to residency. They make working relationships with the location. So many projects you see by contemporary artists, you know it's because they get the funding from those places and then they're encouraged to make a work in response to that place. It says so much about art world tourism.

LS

They're so limited.

AK

Well, they're limited by the context that the funding provides for them.

LS

We've always fought site-specificity. What we've done was to work in what we would call "context-awareness."

AK

That was a very specific response you just gave.

LS

It's something that we have discussed on many occasions, going from "site-specificity" to "context-awareness."

AK

That will be number six of the publication.

JM

Yes, because it's responsive to context.

LS

Yes, exactly. It's not about the physical site, but it's about an awareness of the context; the context being the institution or our funding or the amount or the kind of work we can produce. All that feeds into the work. The work is also about the modes of production available to the artist. The first space was really generic and small and that caused some constraints in terms of what we could do. I think the projects we had in the second space were the closest to a certain understanding of site-specificity because the site was very specific and it only allowed a very particular set of artworks. We could hang very few things on the wall. The artists never were, except one probably, Sancho Silva was site-specific. It was a project that could only exist in that space and could not exist anywhere else.

AK

Right. But even then, it was about the architecture and less about the cultural context of Lisbon.

LS

Exactly. But all the other projects had to deal with the space, obviously. No artist would be so dumb to ignore the conditions in which their work was going to be presented.

AK

And especially in a space like the previous space. Because you have to contend with it, if anything.

LS

That is as site-specific as it got. And that, funny enough, is when we started doing site visits because it was very important for the artist to see the space. You need to see it before you even start thinking about the project.

AK

Oh, that's when you started bringing the artists in? Have you had artists before who've come and proposed projects that read differently within the local context then what they had intended?

LS

Céline Condorelli was an example. She didn't want to engage specifically with the local context. She has been for a very long time very interested in cork, as a material. Which, in itself, it is what it is.

AK

It is what it is. But in Portugal it is loaded.

LS

Having a foreign artist coming for a show in Lisbon and wanting to do a project that, even though it's not about cork, utilizes cork as its main material, seems like one of those situations in which an artist comes and starts dealing with the context. Cork is a national symbol. It's one of our most important industries; so many items are made from cork for touristic consumption. It is a symbol of what Portugal is. For an artist to come and work with that, he or she had to deal with the narratives and the politics that feed into that material.

AK

Right. Which might not have been the reason she was interested in it.

JM

She was not at all.

LS

Exactly. But if you're an artist and you do a project with cork in New York it means one thing. If you're an artist and you do a project on cork in Lisbon, that means something completely different. We had to be vocal about those consequences. Cork being a national symbol, what does it mean for an international artist to do a project using that? What is the message? Or if there isn't any message, what are the consequences? And I think she realized it. The idea fell through. It's the same and we've had this happen so many times; artists come to Portugal or they read Portuguese literature and they're fascinated by Fernando Pessoa and his multiple personas and they want to do a project about Fernando Pessoa. Yes, his literary work is amazing, but the guy was a fascist sympathizer. He represents a lot of things and when you decide to work with that, you're bringing it to the projects. And one should be aware of those things. I think as a curator, again, it would be careless of us not to bring the artist's attention to all these things.

AK

That's what I was also thinking about, too, when I brought up foreign curators coming into this context, if there were nuances to the local context that they may or may not be aware of politics on the ground that are just necessarily out of sight if you can't speak the language.

LS

I think that only happens when there is an attempt to engage with the context. If you don't engage with the context, then it's fine. You know, you just operate here as you would operate anywhere else.

AK

Then this doesn't become an elsewhere. It becomes an anywhere else.

LS

Yes. And then, it's a sort of cultural colonialism because some places, you feel you have the right to engage with and others are international enough where

that thought doesn't even occur to you.

AK

Doesn't even occur. Like, you wouldn't necessarily respond to New York.

JM

Yes.

LS

You don't have to respond to the context of New York or London.

AK

Or Berlin.

LS

But you would respond to the context in Lisbon. What does that say about how you're engaging with these locations? That's what we need to be aware of and when we work with an artist, we need to bring their attention to it. Because then as an institution, we wouldn't feel comfortable presenting such a project.

AK

As a friend, you need to inform them.

LS

Exactly. We want the best for the artist. I think it only happened that once, right? And it didn't come from a response to the context. It came from a genuine interest in the material.

AK

One thing we haven't talked about that we really should talk about is your institutional design identity and the way that you change your logo constantly. There's a consistency with your identity as an ethos, but the skin of the institution is constantly changing. You've also had three spaces, maybe not by choice. But

there is this idea that there is a new look each season so that the branding is unstable.

JM

Everything is unstable.

AK

Sure. But Kunsthalle Lissabon as a name remains. You're not changing the name.

JM

Yes, that's true.

LS

And we've changed that.

AK

What do you mean?

LS

Which season was it? We rebranded the name. We made it into a hashtag.

AK

You made it #kunsthallelissabon?

LS

And that was our name. Instead of Kunsthalle Lissabon, K L capitalized, it was #kunsthallelissabon.

AK

But that was also a logo, right?

LS

Yes, yes. It was also a logo, but the name changed. We referred to it as #kunsthallelissabon.

AK

You said "Have you been to my space, #kunsthallelissabon?"

LS

It was zeitgeisty. It was like, "Let's be ironic about hashtags." No. The space is easier. We moved from the first, the second location before we wanted, well, we needed a bigger space for practical reasons because of admin work, but we also wanted to be challenged curatorially.

JM

A new challenge.

LS

We felt we'd exhausted all the possibilities of the first space, so we wanted something different. The move from the second to the third space was just because we were kicked out. We were evicted and we had to find a new space. If we had the choice, we would probably still be in the old space. If nothing else, the rent was, well, there was no rent.

AK

No, that's fine. But I think that the logo is the thing that has the potential to also travel with the Kunsthalle, right?

LS

The image, not just the logo. Everything. You know, our brochures have been different. Our invitations have been different. Our logos have been different.

JM

Our business cards.

LS

Our publications. Our business cards have been different. Our publications, even though they're designed by the same people, each volume is completely different from the other. Everything is signaling that the institution is not immutable. Quite the opposite. And we just want to make that explicit through its visual appearance.

AK

Right. And design trends change, right? I mean, that's why whenever a new director takes over an institution there's a rebrand.

LS

They do, yes.

JM

They always change their logo and design.

LS

And to be fair and honest, that wasn't our idea. It was André Romão's.

AK

So, working with an artist.

LS

He doesn't want to be credited for this because he's an artist. He's not a designer. But he's a good friend and he's a silent partner, in a way, because he's responsible for the way we look. How the world sees us is because of him, you know. Him and Bruno, and those are the silent partners.

JM

Bruno the photographer.

LS

Bruno the photographer and André, our "designer." Bruno's amazing. And going back to what we were talking about, and this is something that really caught my attention over the past year, he has been doing more and more documentation of exhibitions. He's now doing probably all the big galleries and he's doing a couple of institutions. Everything that is being documented by him looks a specific way, to the point where when we see exhibition views by somebody else, they look weird to us. That's amazing because documentation is what is left of an exhibition. So in 10, 20 years' time, Bruno has shaped how this decade looks because the exhibitions will be gone and what art historians will have access to is his point of view of the exhibition. It looks amazing, of course, but it looks very specific. You can identify what photos he's done and what photos somebody else did. That's very interesting because he's responsible for how things look and will look like in the future. I think that is very interesting.

Bruno and André are responsible for how the world perceives us. Outside of people who actually come to the exhibition space, they're responsible for our image. Documentation of exhibitions and branding. They're our silent partners. To a certain extent, they're more responsible for what Kunsthalle Lissabon is than we are. I'm not saying this ironically. I genuinely believe that. Basically, it was André's idea to switch the logos because we had a very crappy logo during the first year, and we were unhappy with it.

And then André's show came along. He was like, "Do you mind if I do my own invitation card, because..."

AK

Oh, because he didn't like your logo.

LS

No, no, not the logo. Just the invitation card. We agreed. We knew it wasn't good, and he did it and it was much nicer. Then for the following show, we asked him, "Do you mind doing the next invitation card?" He did the following two and then he came to us, like, "Listen, your logo's really bad. What if I do a new logo? And by the way, what if I work on a new image for next year?" We go, "Do you mind doing that?" And he says, "No, no, no. It's fine. What if it changed every year?" He did the second year and then at the end of the second year he approached us and said "What if we changed it again? And what if we kept changing it?" And we said, "Are you sure?" He goes, "It's no trouble. I'll do it. It's fun." And then he created a monster.

AK

And now he can't get out of it.

JM

Yes.

LS

But it's really nice. And it's funny. He puts a lot of thought into it and the first year he did it, our second year, it was the broken logo, which was beautiful. It was this idea of a broken Kunsthalle. Something's not right about it. And it was nice.

AK

Do you guys take design meetings with him?

LS

We do.

JM

Yes, and he always suggests something. I'm from a communications background, as you know, so I was always kind of fighting with him. Not anymore.

LS

The second year was a bit conceptual, like the broken logo, the broken Kunsthalle. And then the third year was just formal. It was triangles. For the fourth year, he went really crazy. He was like, "Let's not have a logo this year. I'm going to use free fonts, funky, crazy fonts, and everything that I do, every invitation, every publication, I'm going to write Kunsthalle Lissabon in a funky font." That was a nightmare because we basically had a different logo every time.

AK

And I'm sure that was annoying for him too.

LS

No, no, because he had everything prepared. And every time we had him, there was this one, this logo, which, is it Amalia Pica?

JM

It's Amalia Pica. It's waves.

LS

Each level is a sunset.

JM

Waves and sunsets.

LS

Waves and sunsets. It's amazing. It's amazing. Then after this crazy, crazy thing, he decided, I'm going to do something really easy, really sober. It was the round one. Black-and-white. And on top of the font, these had colors. So, like, crazy. It was so extreme. It was so intense. It was a nightmare. Then he went to a circle. Really simple. Really straightforward. Really clean. And then after that, it was the hashtag.

JM

It was the hashtag.

LS

It was a wavy hashtag. And we had to rebrand. It was #kunsthallelissabon, everything.

AK

Got it. I'm realizing we haven't

talked about radical hospitality.

LS

We have enacted it.

JM

Yes, yes.

GW

We've been immersed in it.

AK

But can we just talk about that term for a second? And can you walk us through the diagram?

LS

Oh my God, the diagram!

AK

The diagram. I have a special place in my heart for the diagram.

LS

You witnessed the diagram before he did.

AK

I did. I was there at its inception.

LS

Radical hospitality. It's been such an integral part of what we've done that I don't even know how to respond or how to translate it. I think, you know, basically, there are two things. There is the inside and the outside of the institution. The inside being the institution itself. The outside being the world at large. Then there are raw materials, what the institution needs to operate and what the institution produces. Its public output. What exists in the world. So that's basically how the diagram is structured. At the core of the institution, at its heart, if you want, is radical hospitality. This is a hijacked version of radical hospitality. And we have it elsewhere because we're working on it for our next project. It's a hijacked version of Jacques Derrida's radical hospitality, in the sense that we retain the name, but it is a mode of engaging with the other that is very specific. It is very socially specific, in the sense that it is

this idea of being born into a context that really emphasizes being together, spending time together. Then using that or recuperating that as a political tool, in a way, or giving it some sort of agency in the way we want the institution to interact with the world.

What radical hospitality needs in terms to start, in terms of instituting, is solidarity, generosity and sociability. Solidarity, in the sense that, you know, we help each other. Generosity, we give to the other. And sociability, we spend time together. We enjoy each other's company. Those are, in a way, the raw materials. It's what the institution needs in order to operate. What radical hospitality produces, and at the time we thought these were non-hierarchical, and they still are in a way, is friendship. Which is a set of socially defined relationships, not only with the artist, but with everyone. Criticality, which is the ongoing reflection that may or may not materialize in the form of production. And production is everything that is publicly accessible. Either that or the exhibitions or lectures or whatever. Criticality can feed into this through publishing or whatever. Friendship is not publicly visible in itself. We institute it, but it doesn't necessarily have to become public in order to institute. And then with Volumes 4 and 5, we go a little bit into this idea of production, because this diagram didn't really account for the importance that the solo show has within what we do. I think what we did with Volumes 4 and 5 was to kind of update this without touching it, just describing how it needed to be updated to account for the solo show, which was something that we felt needed to be articulated because we have been doing it for a very long time and we never touched upon it.

AK

Exhaustion is a very real thing within one's own work and I wanted to hear your thoughts on this question of being tired or exhausted, or that it's okay to be tired or to think about change. You guys were talking about instituting other models or a kind of a shift to maybe another position. Or putting this all aside. I wonder, how much of that, on some level, is motivated by a sense of being tired? Which, I want to say, is a valid position. I have that in my own space.

LS

We have felt exhausted on numerous occasions. I think it's part of what everybody does. But I think more problematic than exhaustion is frustration. I think exhaustion is easy to solve or easy to fight. You just take a few days off. And we at Kunsthalle Lissabon, we have that.

AK

You can institute your own holidays.

LS

Yes. Or we can institute a pause, either in between shows or, you know, we're only open from Thursday to Saturday, so we can, his job permitting, we can go away on Sunday and only return on Thursday morning, for instance. And we can have almost a week of just time off. Frustration, on the other hand, is more difficult to deal with. It's harder to cope with. And it has been frustrating on many, many occasions on account of money, on account of, you know, uncertainty, precarity. Those are things that you have no control over. And I think that lack of control is what is so frustrating.

AK

Have you ever had frustrations with regard to your audience?

LS

No. We produce our audience. We produce our public. None whatsoever. I love my public. If you assume your public as equal, if you assume your public as intelligent and if you assume your public as able to understand complex ideas, they will understand complex ideas.

AK

I agree with you. For sure.

LS

We welcome dissent. We welcome critique. We welcome different opinions. Sure, we would love if everybody loved our shows.

AK

Right. Or if you had 50 people through the door every day or whatever.

LS

Exactly. But I think if we have an audience that is able to tell us that they haven't liked the show for this or for that reason, that is as valid as having someone saying that they have enjoyed the show because of this or that.

GW

Right.

JM

We have discussed that a lot with the artists.

LS

Institutions produce a public sphere, but they also produce a public. The public doesn't exist. It's not a thing that comes to us. We produce it. And if we produce a public that refuses oversimplification, that refuses populism, then that is the public you will have.

AK

And it might be a small public.

JM

But it's not always a question of the amount of people you have.

LS

For us to have, on average, 500 people visiting our exhibitions, that's amazing. Today we had 30 people. That's already ten percent of the show. It just opened two days ago. Things do change. We have more people when it's a local artist — of course, because friends and family come — than if you have, you know, a Lebanese artist that no one knows. Where did you find this artist? We cater to a different set of interests. We're not the big museum like MAAT, we're not Instagram friendly. I think we have an amazing public. We always wish we had more, obviously, because we want to reach more people, the same way we want to do more, obviously.

GW

I'm curious about whether you are filling a gap in what was here or what wasn't present. Presumably, there's a different landscape, and you've talked a little bit about that. I'm wondering what kind of gaps are you filling now.

LS

I think the gap we were filling in was that of reflection, curatorial reflection, and basically of assuming curating as a disciplinary field as opposed to a tool. On the other hand, we are drawing attention to the lack of international artists showing in Lisbon. We wanted to make Lisbon a more international place, a place where artists would show, international artists would show and international artists would want to show. In a very kind of simplistic way, we wanted to put Lisbon on the international map. So those were the gaps that we perceived and those were the gaps that we were trying to fill in, which are still the same. That hasn't changed.

JM

I think in terms of international representation, it changed a bit now. Not in terms of curatorial discourse and all that.

LS

But we still serve a very specific function, which is as a small-scale production institution. We do commission. That is still not very present. We commission local artists and international artists. International artists are a bit easier because no one has really shown in Lisbon so we can just choose whatever we're interested in.

AK

Is it important that it's always the first time that an artist has shown in Lisbon?

LS

Yes.

AK

Including the local artists or for the local artists, is it their first solo show?

JM

For the local artists, it's a bit different.

LS

It's a bit different. I think the criteria are different.

JM

Even for the international artists. They can have been in group shows.

LS

In group shows. But we want to show what hasn't been shown. If it is an artist that works with a commercial gallery here and shows every two years, then there's no point in showing that person.

AK

Because they're already part of a conversation in some way.

LS

Exactly. With Portuguese artists, because we do have the resources, and most frequently, younger artists who are not represented by a gallery have a difficult time having access to production because they don't have the money, we try to work with those artists. We try to allow them to use the resources we have available to develop a project. And that most frequently ends up being younger artists, or people who haven't been working with galleries. There are exceptions. Like Leonor Antunes, but she hadn't had a show in Lisbon for many years and we really, really wanted to work with her. And we thought her work would function amazingly in that space. There aren't rules. We're always flexible.

AK

Well, that also leads me to this. You've discussed shifting the mainstream. You've also talked about hijacking the mainstream, or at least that idea comes up in Simon Sheikh's text.

LS

I think that came from this ongoing debate about the position of critique and how critique is no longer a relevant tool because then the binary between the inside and outside doesn't exist anymore.

AK

Right. The trope that institutional critique has become institutionalized.

JM

Yes.

LS

Exactly. Critique in itself doesn't make sense anymore because you can't really claim an outsider position and then make the critique of the inside, because that doesn't exist anymore. We're all inside. There's no outside. There's no way out. So that's why we struggle, not anymore because now we're a proper institution. But back in the beginning, people were calling us an alternative space, an independent space, and we really had to kind of take that apart. And you couldn't simply say we're not independent, we're not alternative. We had to go deep into what does alternative mean? Alternative to what? Independent from what?

AK

And especially if you're replicating certain models or systems.

LS

An outsider position is no longer valid because there is nothing other than the mainstream. You know, the mainstream kind of took over and that's all there is. One of the reasons why we called Kunsthalle a "kunsthalle" was because of that. We wanted to operate from within the mainstream because the position of critique is no longer valid, there is nothing other than operating from within and hopefully shifting things gradually. We had the example of new institutionalism where they attempted a radical change and they basically achieved nothing but their extinction. It lasted for five years and then, it was too radical. They were all dependent on political powers and public funding and, you know, that just didn't work. We knew that that couldn't happen. The only way we could try to achieve something, or we thought the only way we could try to achieve something was to claim that position of the mainstream, of a Kunsthalle, with the business card and the director and whatever, and slowly, without anyone noticing it, just shifting some of the protocols of the mainstream. Hijacking now seems like kind of a strong word, but shifting. I struggle with using biological metaphors for things that are fundamentally subjective and social in their nature, but it's a bit like the process of evolution. Over a long period of time, small changes add up and you end up with having something that is completely different from what you started with.

AK

And you don't notice those changes, because it's gradual.

LS

An amazing example would be after, I don't know, seven, eight years,

whatever, we would have been able to make every institution pay an artist's fee. Something like that. Or that no one exploits intern labor. It's impossible to achieve that, especially in such a small period of time. But that would be the goal.

AK

That would be the goal. Those would be the political stakes.

LS

Exactly. And not only that, but in terms of thinking about what the public is or thinking what a solo exhibition is. You know, slowly, changing all these things so that eventually we would end up with an institution that knows how to better deal with the world as it is right now.

AK

Right. But then maybe it's also responsive.

LS

Exactly.

GW

It's very interesting because your institutional legacy, the product of your work is both internal and external. To have an influence, not just on the types of aesthetic forms and vocabularies that people have access to and witness, but also the types of institutional practices that happen like artist's fees or, things like that.

LS

It's all the same thing, basically. To a certain extent, you know, we're not just presenting something. We're representing something. And what do you choose to represent? And not what, but who do you choose to represent as an institution? A clear example is when you look at our gender ratio. If we haven't shown more women than men, it's pretty even. And we don't claim it as a political position. We just enact it. Period. It's not that we think, okay, we need to invite more women to keep this balanced. It just happens. And you

know, I think in terms of self-instituting, we've achieved that. Like, I think for the two of us, gender stopped being an issue of representation.

JM

Yes.

LS

We don't have to fight it anymore. It's just the way it is. We've shown Middle Easterners, Latin Americans, you know. It's not only about European. We were talking about we will have a solo show now by a North American artist for the first time next year. In seven years, it will be the first time we will be working with someone from the United States. So that is curious. I think all these things, to us, they're one and the same thing. I'm moving from more politically charged work like Ahmet or Pilvi or Mounira to more formal things like Melvin or Leonor. You know, and that changes, and I think it is important.

JM

Even from them, there's some political stuff.

LS

I know. It's true. It's true. I'm oversimplifying, I know.

AK

Right, yes. But also, like, politics is such a charged word.

LS

No, I know.

AK

You have politics in arts. There's different ways of enacting politics.

LS

Yes, exactly.

AK

I think that so often, "politics" gets boiled down to what the subject matter is, right?

LS

Yes, political art.

JM

Of course.

AK

A lot of problematic work is produced under the name of politics.

LS

Yes, definitely. We never referred to art as political.

JM

As political at all.

AK

Right.

LS

We refer to it as engaging with the world more explicitly or dealing with.

JM

Or dealing with some specific context.

LS

But we never used political. We struggle with that idea of political art because all art is political, of course.

AK

Exactly. And politics means so many different things in so many different contexts and situations and bodies, etc.

LS

There is no difference to us between one thing or the other. It's all part of the same thing. Sometimes you institute things that are explicitly public and others, they don't need to be public to be instituted. Like ethics. You don't need to make them public in order for them to affect change.

AK

But your ethos, privately and publicly, would be consistent, right?

LS

Yes, exactly.

JM

We've also made it public in a way, in the applications forms and all that. People know what our ethos is.

LS

But it's not explicit. We're not claiming that position publicly. It's an application. It's different. We're just enacting it. But you were saying...

AK

It reminded me of a recent headline, which was that Hillary Clinton has been getting a lot of beef lately because she said that public policy doesn't always connect with your private opinions. I thought that was interesting and it actually leads me to a question of contradictions. You started with a name that was full of contradictions and a project that is now both fully coherent, but yet embedded in a state of contradiction.

LS

Contradictions are productive. Aren't they?

AK

Yes. That's why I asked the question.

JM

The best things come from contradiction. It goes back to working as a duo, to working together as the symbology of contradiction and the responsibility of dialogue.

LS

We've always avoided binary reasoning. I think contradictions allow you to do that. To a certain degree, to be honest, I think contradictions can be

productive up until a certain point and then they can be extremely disruptive. But I think they can be productive. We played with contradictions, and we probably played more than we should have with contradictions in the beginning.

AK

There was a line in the Simon Sheikh essay that really stuck out to me. We talked about how you've kind of gradually transformed into an institution. He says, through faking something until it became real, you gradually transformed into something else or were replaced by something else. Or was it something else altogether, you know, in the first place? Is it possible that you misinterpreted it? And I thought it was really interesting that not only is he talking about other people misinterpreting you, but that potentially you misinterpreted yourselves.

LS

I think we did.

JM

We did.

LS

I think from the beginning, we were operating, as we are now, or these ideas were already there. We just misinterpreted them for something else. Or we were so focused on the founding kind of gesture that we didn't pay attention to what was there. It took us a bit of time to realize that these ideas were there from the beginning and that they were, not only were they sound, they were potentially relevant. But it took us at least three years to realize that they were something that we should look into and explore.

AK

Right. I mean, that's also

probably pointing back to your own background in psychology. There's a sort of subconscious thing happening.

LS

There is this kind of ongoing self-reflexivity that comes from that. I'm always self-analyzing myself. Every single thing, you know. Everything. My body language. My facial expression. What I'm saying. The tone of my voice. I'm constantly on kind of self-awareness mode. So it's funny that I self-monitor myself every single day, every single minute of my waking time. And it's funny that we ended up with a project where the main mission is self-reflection. It's funny, every decision we make, we kind of go through the consequences and the results, the conditions. Everything. A good example, and I think we briefly mentioned it, was this art initiative for nonprofit projects to get sponsored through crowdfunding. A couple of years ago, we were told that we would be very interesting candidates for an initiative and that we should apply and that would most likely give us a lot of money. And then we were like, "Of course, we need the money." I don't know, 25,000 Euros, 30,000 Euros, whatever. That would be very helpful. But at the same time, we ended up in this discussion whether or not an art fair should sponsor or should validate a nonprofit space. Were we willing to let go of a certain control or a certain political agency over getting a nice grant? And if we would get that grant, could we still claim that position? We discussed it for I don't know how many days intensely. We decided that we couldn't decide that on our own. We didn't know how to answer. And what we could do was to start a discussion, a more open discussion about it. We would bring that question to our community, probably online or in our physical space, and then we would make a decision based on the feedback of everyone. And we said, "We have some concerns about this model of funding nonprofit spaces from the major art fair in the world. Even though we really need the money, we aren't very sure of the consequences or the ethical or political consequences of that for the project. What we would like to do was to initiate a public discussion, which the result would be our response to your invitation." And they never answered back. I think that was an amazing way of resolving the situation. Because we wanted to engage in a more meaningful discussion about what that meant and clearly, they weren't interested.

AK

But that also leads to a question we've touched on briefly: When did you decide Kunsthalle Lissabon can go offsite and do

projects elsewhere? When is it Kunsthalle Lissabon and when are you representatives that are separate from Kunsthalle Lissabon, but you're credited as the directors? Because that is a difference. And what are you comfortable with for the institution? You might not necessarily want an art fair attached to the institution, but maybe it's okay as individuals?

LS

Yes, it's a matter of not making sense. Why would an institution curate the solo projects of an art fair? It wouldn't make any sense. I think there are two reasons that we use to decide one or the other. The first is when the project or when the invitation or the collaboration is somehow related to the ongoing reflection. If it is something that is, I don't know, that revolves around the institution or thinking about institutions or thinking about what role or what agency an institution can have, then that is clearly a project for Kunsthalle. When it's something not necessarily connected to that, then it could be us as curators because our interests grow outside of the work we do for Kunsthalle. We're interested in a bunch of other things that don't necessarily feed into Kunsthalle and that could become a project in itself. And for instance, for the David Roberts Art Foundation, after the guest curator series, Dave invited Kunsthalle. And the reason they wanted to invite Kunsthalle was because they want that reflection. What is relevant in terms of curating and what is relevant in terms of thinking about institutions at this moment? So, we're going to do something related to friendship.

We're going to materialize, we're going to attempt to materialize, friendship in an exhibition format. We don't know yet how that will happen, but it's going to happen. And that is clearly a reflection on what is an institution, so it makes sense that it is the institution. But then we're curating a show at a gallery in Mexico City later the next year. It's a project, it's a one-off. It has nothing to do with institutions. It's going to be a thematic group show. Period.

AK

There is another quote I thought was nice from Simon Sheikh, where he talked about not just being resistant or insurgent, but

also “instituent.”

LS

Exactly.

JM

Call it institutence.

LS

It is a more proactive form of engaging with the world. Instead of resisting or insurging against something, you’re instituting something.

AK

Yes, and I think it goes back to the very first question, and the first point that was made about thinking of the institute as a verb and not as a noun. As an active proposition.

LS

Exactly.

AK

That instituent position.

LS

And it doesn’t really make sense in your case because it’s Institute of Contemporary Art, right?

AK

Right.

LS

What if that, instead of a name, was a verb?

GW

Right.

LS

What would that do to an institution? I like the idea of shifting the meaning of the word that everyone is taking for granted. What would happen if that is not a noun, if it’s a verb? What could it mean to institute *for* contemporary art?

Or *to institute* contemporary art?
