

Conversation with HAMZA WALKER, LAXART

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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HAMZA WALKER, LAXART

Hamza Walker is the Director of LAXART, a nonprofit visual art space that promotes developments in contemporary culture through exhibitions, publications, and public programs in Los Angeles, CA.

With Alex Klein

ALEX KLEIN

When we first started talking informally about this subject, you were still at The Renaissance Society in Chicago. I wonder if maybe we could backtrack a bit to right before you arrived at LAXART. You have talked about how you have concrete ideas about how a “society” is different from an “institute.” I’d like to start with this question as a way to segue into how we think about the language that we use to describe what we do.

HAMZA WALKER

They’re two words that suggest a group. But an institute seems much more formal to me than a society, at least when we talk about something as general as “the social.” You think the social as a gathering of people. It doesn’t imply a hierarchy, as opposed to an institute, which is a formal structure. And an institute is also a place. I think of an institute in that formal sense versus a society, which can gather and meet anywhere—so, even in those connotations of the words, they’re two very different things. If you were to have a meeting in a university president’s office to gather and to say, “We’re founding an institute,” it’s like, “Oh, okay. Who’s funding this?” That has a very rigid, very concrete sense, as opposed to a society, which is a gathering of like-minded individuals perhaps, or people who have a common stake in a given interest or field.

AK

I think that's such a lovely answer. I also asked you to begin by reflecting on your time LAXART just because you spent so many years at the Renaissance Society. I'm curious about how that particular ethos may or may not inform the work that you do now in your current context. What year did you arrive at LAXART?

HW

My formal start date was October 1, 2016. I didn't arrive in Los Angeles until Christmas Day of 2016. My first day at the office was January 3rd of 2017.

AK

And you're the Director, correct?

HW

Director.

AK

And before you began, LAXART had recently moved to a new space?

HW

We're now four years into the new space, located at 7000 Santa Monica. Before, it was in Culver City, on La Cienega Blvd.

AK

That's the space that I remember very well. Can you talk a little bit about the founding impulse of LAXART? Why was it founded? And what is the mission?

HW

We rewrote the mission statement, which is on our website. It now reads: *LAXART is a nonprofit visual art space that promotes developments in contemporary culture through exhibitions, publications, and*

public programs. We believe that contemporary art is a means of understanding key issues of our time with all their inherent contradictions. Contemporary art assumes many forms. Rather than provide answers, it raises questions. Through a range of offerings, we contextualize contemporary art both socially and art historically. Our programs are free and designed to be accessible to the general public.

LAXART started in 2005, with Lauri Firstenberg as the founding Director. She worked in concert with a number of artists. Key among them was Daniel Joseph Martinez, who was one of the founding board members. So, even though it wasn't an artist-run space, it was still important, and I think Daniel played a crucial role in keeping it relatively artist-centric. It was very L.A. in its focus on emerging artists, with artists such as Mark Bradford and Jonas Wood.

AK

2005 is actually when I landed in LA for grad school. It was such a different art world in L.A. than it is today and LAXART played a different role in the scene.

HW

Oh, absolutely. You've gotta think about the idea of the amount of talent that's generated, the number of MFAs based on the programs that are here. You have UCLA, USC, Art Center, CalArts, Otis, UC Irvine, UC Long Beach. These are all great programs. So, there's a real bumper crop of talent year-in and year-out, right? Not to mention the number of years before that had formed a critical mass. And then how did the artistic community here self-organize? Does it self-organize in a way? In terms of the number of venues that are attenuated to that set of circumstances, I think LAXART was quite self-conscious in terms of its founding. It was quite conscious of that set of conditions as opposed to it being a tacit matter of fact. It was like, "Wait, wait—let's actually address this consciously." You think about the profile of the institutions within the ecology and whether they're picking up the slack of doing projects with emerging talent outside of a commercial context.

AK

Right. At the time in Culver City, LAXART would have been adjacent to the heart of the commercial gallery scene.

HW

Exactly. And it was a different Los Angeles insofar as the Los Angeles gallery

scene was still Bergamot Station, Chinatown, and Culver City. This is before—and now I'm going to sound perhaps idiotic—Google Maps changed the city. I would say it has made L.A. a more accessible city. Part of moving to Los Angeles is the intimidation factor about its geography, the idea of negotiating the Thomas Guide and that stuff.

AK

I was just going to say, you don't need a *Thomas Guide* anymore. Mine was so ripped up.

HW

I would say that is definitely a gamechanger. There isn't really a congregation of galleries anymore. If you want to open a gallery and I want to open a gallery, is there any reason that we should open a gallery next door to one another? It used to be, "Let's open on Sunday, and let's try and have the same audience." And now, it's like, "Oh, no. If you want to open your thing over in the far reaches of Glendale, fine. I'm going to open my gallery over here."

AK

Totally. Do you know the reasoning behind the move away from Culver City to your current location?

HW

Regen Projects, Michael Kohn, Steve Turner, Various Small Fires, Hannah Hoffman. It was a latter-day hub. When you think about Chinatown, it was a last bid to have another gallery district. And when you say, "What does it mean to be centrally located?" now, you think about downtown. It's like, "Well, being downtown. We would want to be downtown." Coming from Chicago, the Loop, downtown's usually the center. That's not the case in L.A. Downtown's on the Lower East Side, basically. That sounds weird.

It's east. It's not the center of Los Angeles. Hollywood is the center of Los Angeles, not downtown. So, it's neither east nor west. You're recognizing that the east is where now, seemingly, I would say a large number of artists live, whereas you've got a collective base and wealth and on the west side. I think of Hollywood as something close to being able to say you're central. I think I'm going to use that as a new billing strategy for us. "LAXART: Centrally Located."

AK

"Centrally located and convenient

to get to on your way home from work.”

HW

Seriously.

AK

Do you know where the thinking behind the name LAXART came from?

HW

It was a placeholder.

AK

A placeholder?

HW

When they were applying for the building, they didn't have a name and someone wrote LAXART on the form. I think it was just somebody in city hall just writing that in.

AK

Really?

HW

That's what I heard. I could be wrong. It could be a rumor. I'd have to confirm it with Lauri. But that's where I heard the name comes from. In some sense, on that count, it's kind of brilliant. But it's the worst name ever. So, if the person had come up with something that was not to be confused with the airport, then I'd be interested in keeping it. But right now, I feel like with any overall revamping of the image and the space and everything, the name is up for grabs.

AK

You're leading right to my next question which is, under your new tenureship, is the name important to you? And does the name need to be reconsidered with how it communicates to audiences who don't already know you?

HW

Right. A certain equity accrues in a name. To change a name is no small thing. I would make a very strong case that we are still near the origins of the institution—I'll call it an institution at this point—that it's still possible to change the name.

We're not so far away from its founding with respect to its development and growth. It made a major move from its original home over to Hollywood. There's been a considerable shift in the Los Angeles landscape. And now, it's on to its second director. Places have histories. And you're always surprised to learn, "Well, it used to be called this." It's a perfectly fine thing to do. Relative to a kind of rousting about and getting used to, I would still say that that's negligible to the ascent and the future of the organization. Whatever equity has been developed with its current name, in weighing that against a hopeful future and a long life, I would say that that's actually negligible.

AK

Right. It's interesting because there's almost a whimsical, surrealist kind of way in which the name came about. It has a provisionality to it. Maybe provisionality fits an institution that's still trying to find its voice. And then when that voice has matured, maybe there's an argument to be made for language to grow with it.

HW

Certainly. Now, coming from The Renaissance Society, where the name was consistent over at least the first half of Suzanne Ghez's 40-year tenure, people complained about the name all the time. And all of sudden, they changed the name, to The Renaissance Society of Contemporary Art or whatever. I would say that The Ren is a case where you're not looking at 12 years. You're looking at a place that's 100 years old. Why would you want to change the name at this point?

The name, in its baroque-ness, to me, speaks more to the contemporary. What could be more appropriate to something as arcane, or whatever we want call the field of contemporary art as a whole, than a name like The Renaissance Society? "Institute of..." makes it sound as though contemporary art is a highly legible thing. The idea that we're going to study culture. We're going to do an analysis. You've got to run a structuralist game on the goddamn subject or object.

AK

Good luck with that.

HW

Yes, exactly. Good luck with that, as opposed to the name which has an arcane, old-time feel for something that's supposedly hip and of the moment.

AK

I would agree with that.

HW

The name of the place, the location of the place were ideal. They went together. So, the question, "What is The Renaissance Society," it's like, "Well, that's like asking, 'What is art?'"

AK

That's great. So, I guess now your question is, "What is LAXART?"

HW

It took a while for the board to take great pride in the name. There was a faction that questioned the name. But there was never a faction that championed the name. And I think now, if you tried to change the name of The Renaissance Society, there would be a rebellion if anybody even suggesting it. It's like, "No, no, no, no." You would have to have served on that board for as long as Suzanne Ghez was its director in order to even think about that.

AK

I get it. So, with LAXART, if you could name it anything right now, have you had thoughts on what that would be? Or is that not something you'd want to let out of the bag?

HW

No, I haven't had thoughts about it. I've been telling people to submit names, come up with some names. Nobody else has taken me up on that offer. Please put this out to readers. I'm looking for a name change.

AK

Okay, you got it!

HW

David Trubach, my college roommate, he said the funniest thing.

He's a mathematician—and you have to know David to even hear how he says this—the tone of his voice is mumbling in a way, but he said, “When I looked on the map for LAXART, I noticed that the nearest other art space that was near you was called LACE. And I also noticed on my map when I was Googling the location that you aren't very far from Hustler Headquarters.” He thought, “If you're going to change the name, since you have one place called LACE and you're not that far from Hustler, maybe you should call it ‘Leather.’”

AK

That's great.

HW

I was like, “That was bad.”

AK

Well, you'd have to sell that to your board, wouldn't you?

HW

I know. But I like the idea of presenting that logic. They're called LACE, so I thought we could call ourselves “Leather.”

AK

That's actually a nice transition into this question of the ecology of where you are now. Since the art world in 2018 is very different now than it was in 2005, how do you see LAX's role in Los Angeles?

HW

That, I'm still figuring out. What is the role of an alternative space within first, the context of Los Angeles now; and second, within the larger context of now, if we're going to entertain that it was something of a founding rubric where emerging and alternative were synonymous with one another. Now, to think “alternative” in the 1970s, you're talking about pluralism, the advent of new media and video and performance and stuff outside the commercial realm. In the 1980s, you're talking about the rhetoric of multiculturalism and representation, gender, the margins in the relationship of alternative spaces to the margin-center discourse. Fast-forward to now, you've got alternative

in Los Angeles equals emerging. Do we want to keep that going? Does alternative mean anything now?

AK

That's the question, right? Is there an alternative in 2018?

HW

It's an alternative, right? I mean, to a commercial scene that's now wholly absorbed in yesteryear's pluralism.

AK

Right. You mentioned LACE, which is an older organization in Los Angeles that was founded under similar principles and has an artist-centered approach.

HW

It's also to think about whether there are specific needs within the community that aren't being met, and whether those needs are best served through exhibitions, per se. By that, I mean are there other forms of nonprofits that meet, in more direct fashion, the needs of artists outside of needing a show or something like that. So, are they more activist in their bent?

Are they more activist? And by activist, are they more local and responsive to a given community's needs? What does it mean to show Trisha Donnelly at LAXART? Well, that actually might not mean jack shit relative to what the local demographics are. Let's look at the LGBT center that's going to open two blocks down because I've got Matthew Marks a mile west of me, and I've got Regen Projects two blocks east of me.

Could it be that you want to do hopelessly local programming? You want to find out who all your social service providers are. Are you in an area with a number of school group students, homeless population? Who are you serving, in other words? That could be a much more immediate set of questions for an alternative space rather than simply, "Let's do some shows."

AK

Right. Who do you think of as your audience? And do you think of that as the same thing as your community? Are they separate things in your mind?

HW

No, they aren't. The audience is the community. But there are many different scales of community. Local, municipally, what's going on in Los Angeles. And when you say local to Los Angeles, that could also mean, "Well, wait a minute. You're in Westwood. Is that your audience?"

AK

Or Long Beach or whatever.

HW

Right. Or, "You're in Long Beach." Right. So, locally and then the region, like L.A. County or something. National. International. So, you want to think about your audience as made up of all those people who are reflective of communities and I'm plugged into all of those kinds of communities.

AK

Right. You had mentioned that you had redone the mission or rewritten the mission. You don't have to read me the whole thing, but I'm curious how you wanted to rearticulate the stakes of LAXART.

HW

It was just to make it more generic in a sense. It's simply to allow it to be a matter of interpretation as to how one would want to fulfill that mission. But there's some latitude in there. And in that way, it's like, "What do you do?" Well, we promote developments in contemporary art through exhibitions. It's like, "Okay. That's really open-ended in a way." It's still, "We are a visual art venue." There's a matter of disposition from one director to another director, which is back to the field. But that can be a matter of degree and not necessarily the kind of programming, as opposed to having somebody say, "No, no, no, no, no. I'm going to interpret that mission. What I see as development is..." and have a wholly different orientation, let's say, about what contemporary art is and who it's for. You could still meet that mission without having to undertake, "Now, we're this. And now, we're that. Now, we're that." So, to have a mission that tasks it with the latitude as opposed to something that's much more touchy, feely, feel-good, and aspirational. It's not, "What's the relationship between contemporary art and social justice?"

And you can find that now, the Hammer has that line in there. And they make good on that stuff. I would say that they make good on that stuff not just through exhibitions in some sense, where the relationship between art

and life is always to be determined—how do you want to configure that relationship? Is it on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to if you look at what Claudia Bestor does in the auditorium in public programs and the fact that they're connected to UCLA? It's like, "Anita Hill is coming to speak." "Oh, okay." "With Mark Bradford." It's like, "Oh, okay. You really are on that tip." Those kinds of things. If somebody wants to be able to pull a space for that—but again, to not have that necessarily be written into the mission—you can do that. That's not a problem. It doesn't need to be written into the mission. You have a mission statement that allows directors A, B, and C to do what it is that they want to do without having to rewrite the mission for every director that you're going to hack up.

AK

Right. And it also gives you the latitude to evolve LAXART as you grow with the institution as well without having to rewrite the mission every few years.

HW

Right, or to question myself like, "Could we do this? Should we do this? Is this outside the mission?" I don't want to have to have recourse to the mission. If you have recourse to the mission with everything that you do, I feel like your mission statement isn't working or because your mission statement is one thing. It's fine. But you shouldn't have to have recourse to your mission statement in order for people to understand who you are.

AK

Right. And you don't want to make rules for yourself.

HW

People understand who you are based on what you do, not based on your mission statement. Your mission statement can be aspirational and can hold all those things. Programmatically, if you begin to do things, that begins to form a profile that people recognize. And it's like, "Oh, that's LAXART, and it's different than Lace. It's different than this place." If somebody says, "Well, I was going to go see this talk. Is it over at the Hammer?" If it didn't fit, you'd be like, "That's weird. That doesn't seem like it should be at the Hammer." It's not like somebody's saying that because of the Hammer's mission statement. They say it because they have a sense of what the Hammer does and what the Hammer is about, and if they know what that scope and sensibility is. And that, to me, is far more important than a mission statement.

AK

That's a great answer. And that also makes me wonder who you're thinking about as your peer institutions or organizations. This can be conceptually driven, as well as historically expansive. It could be people or organizations with whom you feel a synergy in ethos, or that are historical precedents, or non-art related.

HW

So, experimental music venues. What's the literature scene like here? The one thing about visual arts, for me, is that you need to read the resources of a theater group to do a Catherine Sullivan piece. I could call a theater group and say, "Look, this is what I need. This artist is doing this thing," or whatever. Now, what would be weird is if a theater group called me. It's like, "We actually need some visual art." What I like about the visual arts is they're not thinkable. I don't necessarily like the word interdisciplinary, but I do like the way that the visual arts are perforated by other disciplines which then become a way to think about a relationship to other disciplines that is a byproduct of self-reflexivity. That's one of the upshots of modernism. And if you're going to ask yourself what you are, then, at some point, it's like, "Well, then what is the difference between you moving your body over here and then dance?"

That kind of an ability to say, "Well, no. I really do think of other institutions, of all disciplines as my sisters," as opposed to if you did theater. Do theater organizations think of everybody else just by virtue of what they are as a discipline? Do they see themselves with having a relationship with other disciplines inherently? As opposed to with visual arts. It's like, "Oh, no. I see myself as having an inherent relationship with other disciplines."

AK

In your programming, do you ever leave your building?

HW

No. L.A.'s hard. L.A.'s very, very hard. So, the issue of leaving the building and offsite programming to me is much more about collaboration. I have no problem leaving the building, per se, but I don't want to leave the building and rent a hall to do something. If I need to do something then I want to do it with the person who's hosting us as opposed to, "Will they let us use their

space in that way?"

AK

Right. Exactly. So, for you, having a building where you are is very important for the exhibition.

HW

We don't have the space. The negotiation between public programs and exhibitions is very real. There are certain public programs that we can do of a certain scale, with certain activities. A program no bigger than the reach of a single human voice. A public program that does not exceed the size of our conference room. So, can we do something in which we expect only 12 people? Yes. That's perfectly fine. It's not a question of, "Can we fit chairs out on the gallery?" We could do that kind of a thing. With certain shows, it's fine, whereas with other shows, it's a little more difficult. So, I just tend to be like, "Okay. Let's renegotiate our relationship to public programs. Let's actually give them complete autonomy as opposed to having them be exhibition bound." If there are ones that are exhibition bound, in some cases, we will—as we did when we relaunched—we'll shut down for the period of one exhibition. We have bleachers. We'll set the bleachers up. And then we'll just do public programs for six weeks. So, the program that you wanted to do about so-and-so, it's like, "Well, that's fine. We can have a specialist come in to talk about it." This is Los Angeles. So, you really have to ask yourself, "Well, you can do it. But is that something that USC would do, or UCLA, now that I'm not in the university." That's the thing.

AK

So the space doesn't solely revolve around exhibition-making. You see programming and exhibition-making as autonomous things.

HW

Absolutely. Right. To really, really think, "How are you going to use your resources within L.A.?" Now that I work at a place that is standalone, to really think about the girth of a public program and say, "If you're going to do it, I want to do something in which I can bank on in L.A. an attendance of 50 people. Let's dig in." So, to look at a space and just say, "Well, I used to have total freedom to do the most obscure kinds of things because I was on the campus of the University of Chicago is just like, "Oh, okay. This is a whole new animal. Now, I'm in the city." What does it mean to program in the context of

the city at-large, and not any city, but L.A.? It's got to be worth your drive.

AK

The traffic, the headache, the parking.

HW

Right. Exactly. It's not like, "Oh, we can do an event, and I can count on the eggheads from the Hyde Park area to come straggling in. And it's going to be on a Sunday at 2:00 PM." Anybody from the artist community that has any hankering to hear about topic X in an academic sense—it's not going to be like— "All right. We're going to get 15–20 people." That's great for some things as opposed to here, it's like, "No. If you do that same program, you're not going to get anybody. You're not going to get anybody that's going to make it worth doing."

AK

Do you own your building?

HW

No, we rent.

AK

How does the funding work for LAXART?

HW

It's a quilt. It's a serious quilt. It used to be benefit-driven. There were two benefits per year. I've been here over a year and a half, a year and eight months, and I've done three benefits in that amount of time, which is a lot. I'm trying to wean us off of two benefits a year to go to one benefit a year. This is the first year where we will have done one benefit.

AK

Are there still art auctions?

HW

They're still auction-driven, yes. There's no way we're ever going to be able to completely wean ourselves off of that. But you just have to diversify your revenue streams.

AK

Okay. So, it's a combination of

private funding, grants, auctions,
that kind of thing?

HW

City and state funding, because it's a nonprofit, and individuals and private foundations.

AK

I'm assuming that in your role as the director here you've had to do a lot more fundraising than you did in your previous job. It's a big part of it, I'm assuming. Is the board still very artist-driven?

HW

Yes. We have Rodney McMillian, Andrea Bowers, Mary Weatherford, Dash Manley. 30 to 40 percent of the board are artists.

AK

Oh, that's wonderful. How big is your organization? How many people are employed by LAXART?

HW

Five.

AK

How many curators are there?

HW

Me and Catherine Taft.

AK

Great. And how many exhibitions do you do a year?

HW

Five to six.

AK

Five to six. So, there's some fluidity with how you determine

the program?

HW

Yes.

AK

How far out are you able to plan?

HW

A couple years. And so, now everybody wants to start: "I'm ready to go. Can I do it in 2020? 2019?" It's like, OK, I'm still new. I have a year and a half behind me. But now, I'm facing the void. I've got Postcommodity. I've got Chris Williams on board. I've got Grace Wales-Bonner on board. I feel like, "Okay. That is all." If I can get between from now to 2020, I'll be OK. And I'm no stranger to the scramble.

AK

None of us are.

HW

You've got to do the scramble. Programmatically, I'm about to just scramble the chats and hack the football metaphors.

AK

What is your annual operating budget?

HW

\$1 million. It can go down to \$800,000. It can go up to \$1.1.

AK

Do you have a collection?

HW

No.

AK

And you don't charge for any programs or exhibitions?

HW

No. Everything's free.

AK

Do you pay your artists fees?

HW

Yes. But we have to look at the field as a whole, overall and its relationship to a market and then commerce. There is an antagonism where nonprofits are suddenly seen as some kind of middle management, that policies need to be brought against or something. And it's like, "Why?" That's completely lopsided.

AK

That brings up a good point and brings us back to this question of the relationship to the market, because LAXART is sitting next to some very big galleries. We were talking earlier about ecology, and you just mentioned some of the artists that you're working with. I'm curious what kind of a platform you feel LAXART gives some artists who are less established, but also different opportunities to established artists like Christopher Williams? What is it that LAXART can offer that might be different than, say, the big gallery that you work with?

HW

We've asked Christopher Williams to curate a show. He hasn't done anything in Los Angeles in 15 years.

AK

Incredible. You would think that he's done something every year.

HW

In terms of showing his own work, he's been gone for a while now. He had a major retrospective at MoMA. He left. And now he's in the desert. On the one hand, Chris is quite simply a child of conceptual art. He came through. But specifically, as it would proffer through to L.A., in asking him to curate a show—not even a show of his own work—I didn't want to limit him. He said,

"Well, actually, I would like to show one photograph. But I don't want that to be shown at LAXART. But I would like it so that somewhere else, in a totally other venue, there would be a wall and a singular photograph which, to me, is beautiful." It does connect to what he's thinking about. He wants to implicate himself. He's heavy-duty in Bertolt Brecht land right now.

AK

When I was in grad school, I made a funny work where I tracked down Brecht's house and Bowie's house because they were both in exile in L.A. There is this wonderful, rich history of people coming to L.A. and hiding out, which you can do in this city. When is the Christopher Williams?

HW

He wants it in 2020. That'll be the show in Berlin. And he wants to do it where he's going to be borrowing a lot of stuff from the Brecht Estate or whatever. He wants to dovetail and try and secure loans of material items. He's really funny. He's like, "What are the light levels?"

AK

How long is your lease in your current building? Do you think at some point you're going to move?

HW

It's five years.

AK

The way LA real estate is going, is that something you're going to have to confront in five years?

HW

Well, we renovated this space and we just relaunched two months ago.

AK

I haven't seen the new renovation.

HW

The space has been completely renovated.

AK

That's awesome. Congrats.

HW

But doing that was all incumbent on talking to the landlord. There were two components to it. We wouldn't want to drop the money to renovate the space. We needed a new roof because it was L.A.

The second is that our rent increases at about three percent annually. But what we pay is well below market price, and our landlord still wanted us here.

AK

That's great. It must be nice to feel like you have stability in the building.

HW

Well, the rent that we pay—we have stability, but how long? I'm on a clock. That buys me six years. Within that six years, that only really buys me three years before there's a discussion about why are we paying rent and should we be here. That's going to come up, what you're paying. If you're paying rent, it's very hard to raise money. People don't want to pay rent.

AK

No. But they like buildings they can put their names on.

HW

Exactly. Right. Rent represents more than 10 percent, 15 percent of your annual budget. That issue about moving, growing, doing whatever, all those questions say, "Okay. I've just bought myself four years before those questions reemerge."

AK

Oftentimes, when a Director comes in, they start a capital campaign for a new building, they redesign the logo, they do a clean sweep, and then they start talking about expansion.

I'm curious because you came from an institution that was very comfortably a particular size and took pride in that. How do you think about growth and scale? Is that something that you want to see happen at LAX in the future or do you feel like it's at a good place where it is?

HW

Right. You nailed it right on the head. Given where I come from, I'm inherently conservative.

AK

Or maybe it's radical in our given climate?

HW

Oh, right. Where I come from, I'm inherently conservative. And the reason I say it two times is it's not just The Renaissance Society in and of itself. It's the University of Chicago. To be conservative is not necessarily in terms of a ridiculous Republican/Democrat way. That's not what the U of C is about at all. It's where it's thought that the more radical sets of ideas come from the conservative camp. What constitutes being progressive per se? It's like, "Well, being progressive, that's perfectly fine. But it's not necessarily radical in terms of one's thinking," which means you can't be afraid to confront particular ideas that might be born of very conservative thinking. In other words, growth is the norm. Then it's like, "Is it?" What is there to counteract that when that becomes the normal course of things? Then you actually really do have to ask what about sustainability? Let's really look at how this thing is built and engineered. Does the tree need to continue to grow? Maybe not. Maybe its roots need to deepen.

AK

Right. That's great thinking.

HW

You can trim the plant actually, and it can still grow underground. Do you want a trust? An endowment? Sustainability and stability? That's the goal. Not growth. If we can just do what we do where we are—if you can maintain the sense of security and not have to scramble year in and year out, that's growth to me. Peace of mind is growth.

AK

Absolutely. It doesn't have to be something that's visible externally.

HW

Basically the gamechanger is confidence. How confident are you in what you do? It's like, "Well, I can't really commit to anything." Well, get the fuck out of here. Are you going to do it or not?

AK

What are your frustrations or roadblocks that you've had so far? I'm assuming when you go into a new situation, there's a lot of that initial energy of, "Okay. Sky's the limit. Now, I can do all these things." But you inevitably hit certain barriers that you may not have seen when you were entering into the situation. These don't have to be negatives, but they're reality checks that will shape what you do in the future.

HW

Well, that question is relative to what one's expectations were in taking this kind of job. I was President of the Board of Randolph Street Gallery when it closed. So, I have very deep feelings about whether organizations should go under. What they're founding isn't a certain set of things. It's there. Places can have a second lease on life. You can go forward. They can change. They can adapt as a fundamental matter. Do they go through painful periods through all those things? They do. But those are chump change compared to the longevity of a place.

You can reorient. But you're going to have board fatigue. You're going to have to go out and find new board members. I'm in a new place. I'm going to have to meet people. I'm going to have to shake hands. I'm going to have to go to parties when I don't want to go to parties. And then you think, "Well, what is it that I thought I was going to be able to do again? Just come up with a slate of programs?" No. You have to think realistically despite the fact that everybody's like, "Oh, well, the honeymoon is over. And we're expecting change or whatever." First, let's fix the leak in the roof. Second, let's look at our insurance policy because right now, we can't ship that Jenny Holzer from

London because our insurance policy is only domestic. Third, I need to hire a Director of Development. If you think we're going to hit roadblocks, it's like, "Well, no. The roadblocks are inherent. You're going to hit those with or without the job." But if you come into something with a more realistic vision about what it entails, then do it, as opposed to, "Oh. I thought I was going to have all this freedom." The most abused word in the English language...

AK

Is it "freedom," of course.
It's building your own set of conditions by the sustainability you're talking about, that you're trying to build into the institution.

HW

Right. What are those freedoms to do what you want? What you choose to do is an end in itself as opposed to the question being for whom you choose to do it. So, the issue of freedom—it's like, if you're doing it for somebody, I don't know if you can necessarily call that freedom. But that's going to determine what it is you choose to do. I feel like you're thinking about all those kinds of questions.

AK

Totally. But I think that's a great answer.

HW

Right. One thing is privileged over another thing. You say freedom, and it's like, "Oh, my God. The eagle and the flag flying." When you just think about that kind of bracket on things, I would say that that comes with being real. Thinking about freedom, it's like, "What? I'm free. Yeah. Do I want to work with Trisha Donnelly on this sound project? I do. Totally." But to really think about, "Well, wait a minute. Is that tempered? What tempers this? Is that the end goal? Is there something past that?" There's certain programs that you want to do. And some of it would be great to do and I'm free to do it. But I don't think that that's necessarily what I want to do. Nor do I think it's right for the institution. Even if I'm free to do it, I am a prisoner of context.

AK

Right. It's what you were speaking to earlier about carving out what LAXART is and what you might come to expect from LAXART.

HW

Most of my common sense is really determined by where it is. What's going on in Los Angeles? I'm here. Who am I doing this for? I'm doing this for the people of Los Angeles. I'm doing this for the people who live here in this region. And what counts in this region? And doing X, it's like, well, I can come up with a slate of programs. But you may as well be landing the spaceship in the middle of Los Angeles. Does anybody care? Does it have hooks? You weren't even thinking. So, the minute you start to think about where you are, well, the freedom stops being the privilege point.

AK

Right. Or the individual point and rather the institutional one.

HW

Exactly. Right. You just establish a different set of priorities.

AK

Sure. I'm curious because we talked about the market a little bit. But Hollywood's engagement with the art world has changed a lot since LAX's inception as well. I'm wondering if that plays any role, the Hollywood money or the Hollywood people, being that it is the main culture industry of Los Angeles?

HW

I'm too green in some sense to really comment, outside of I would say the stereotypes that you hear about in terms of a particular kind of collecting class is built around the industry. And I wouldn't say those stereotypes are not true. I also would not go that far and say that those stereotypes exist for a reason. Is there an ethos or a culture within that kind of collecting class that distinguishes it from old money that then says, "We'd never think about speculating in the arts." As opposed to people who lose \$100,000.00 in a night in poker games? And it doesn't do shit to them. You can't level that value judgment that you normally would against it—in one point, it's just like, that's neither good nor bad.

AK

I partially ask because in the

last ten years, there's been a shift. LACMA has got their film gala, for instance, and you see the celebrity Hollywood culture coming into contact with the art world in a way that maybe wasn't quite as present 15 years ago.

HW

Sure. Even with the Emmys controlling stock. I feel like there's a stereotype and it gets on the surface in terms of photo opps. But there is another layer in terms of the entertainment industry. And that is the talent agencies starting to represent artists.

AK

Like CAA or something like that?
They have an art collection.

HW

Well, they all have art collections because they're buying art. But when they say they represent artists meaning artists are another kind of talent. So, Jeff Koons, in addition to having a gallerist, he'd also have an agent.

AK

It's a whole other thing. There are those kinds of machinations and maneuvers that are particular to here. But they don't necessarily touch what you do on a day-to-day basis I guess is what I'm asking.

HW

No. It's not a question if they do. They do insofar as it is an activity that is going on here. It doesn't touch what I do per se in another way, but you're talking about activity and transactions and things that are part of the landscape. So, the minute that something becomes part of the ecology, well then, it touches on what I do. Right. I can't not pay attention to that plan now. It's there.

AK

Maybe we can end on a more general question about your

vision for where you'd like to see this place go. If the sky were the limit, what would you like to see happen?

HW

Just to grow it one foot in front of the other and to stabilize the place administratively. We got offices, right? I got the staff offices. We'll redesign the place so that the roof is fixed. We have a better insurance policy. I want to shore it up, both administratively and programmatically, in equal measure. How is your back of house, to some extent—and I'm going to say it, and I mean it in a positive way—professionalized? When you have the footprint of the organization, and this is how much we pay per month in rent, it has a structural footprint to it that demands a modicum of professionalization.

In terms of being a director, I have to be sensitive to that. So, to not simply to feel as though, "Oh, it's an admission to the programming," and also be mindful of institution building. That sounds wrong, but just where was it and where does it come from? Let's shore up the basement. Let's pour the foundation. Are there cracks in the foundation? Let's put in a new joist instead of just keeping on running.

AK

Sure. And I'm hoping you're thinking you're going to be there for a while? Because this stuff takes time.

HW

Well, it depends. What constitutes time now? Sitting still for five years? Try 22 years. Try 20 years, where in terms of coming from places, it's not just like, "Oh, I'm inherently conservative when it comes to a question of growth." I'm also more conservative with respect to what my sense of time and seeing change is.
