

Conversation with
SOLVEIG ØVSTEBØ,
The Renaissance
Society

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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SOLVEIG ØVSTEBØ,
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Solveig Øvstebø is the Director of The Renaissance Society, a contemporary art museum in Chicago.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

TAUSIF NOOR

What are the origins of the Renaissance Society, and why is it called the Renaissance Society as opposed to "Institution" or another kind of organizational framework?

SOLVEIG ØVSTEBØ

I think that has to do with where and when the Renaissance Society was founded. Faculty members at the University of Chicago formed it in 1915. It was established as "a society to stimulate a love of the beautiful and to enrich the life of the community through the cultivation of the arts," to quote the founders. This was the original commitment, and I think that is where the notion of society came in. It wasn't thought of initially as a museum. In the beginning, it was more like a platform for hosting lectures and a place for the exchange of ideas and discourse within the arts.

ALEX KLEIN

In its very first years was it an exhibition space? Or, as you mentioned, was it really more of a platform for critical thought?

SØ

It was both, though it didn't have its own dedicated space until 1930. The museum's original 1916 constitution outlined a mandate to hold exhibitions, but also to host lectures and issue publications. The program's scope and ambition were fairly limited until Eva Watson-Schutze took the directorship from 1929 to 1935. She worked with artists, scholars and poets from all over the world,

and was especially influential as an early advocate of European Modernism for a skeptical Midwestern audience. For example, Fernand Léger's first exhibition in the United States came to the Renaissance Society first, and then traveled to MoMA. This isn't so strange when you remember that at that time, MoMA was itself not a big institution. Léger was also not that famous then, at least in the US. The big museums here weren't showing his works yet, which were seen as very contemporary when they were shown at the Ren.

AK

This was a moment before the "contemporary," so it's interesting to think about the terms of whatever that might have been.

SØ

Exactly.

AK

Why Renaissance?

SØ

I think that the "Renaissance" part of the name was about the aforementioned exchange of art and knowledge, and more specifically new knowledge, or a renewed commitment to sharing knowledge, if you will.

AK

What is the Renaissance Society's current relationship to the university?

SØ

In the early 1970s, just before Suzanne Ghez took over the directorship, the Renaissance Society and the University of Chicago split up. There were many different reasons. One was that the university was establishing their own museum, the Smart Museum. It was decided we could stay on campus, but there would no longer be a formal bond between the University of Chicago and the Renaissance Society. So now, we're at the university, but we're not of the university, which is why we are such a strange institution. We are a completely independent organization with our own board, but we do not own our own building. It's an institution without a house, in a sense. I don't think there's anything like us in this country, actually. I would like to also acknowledge that we of course get our space and other in-kind support from the university.

AK

Interesting. Are you obligated to any other dictates of the university or to follow any of their codes?

SØ

Not formally, but we frequently work with the university on projects. We value being a part of the community here and collaborate closely with faculty and different academic departments. The fact that we are here also informs how we do things. The rigor of the university is reflected in the rigor of our program. It's an attitude: the wish to dive deep and do the work in a focused way, instead of casting a broad net.

Among the most rewarding parts of our being here are the relationships we develop with the student body. We have work-study students helping in the office and welcoming guests at the front desk. We organize tours and facilitate discussions for class groups. We've also developed programs around students, such as a special student membership and a small student committee we work with on certain projects. I've enjoyed participating in forums, panels, and seminars on campus. The student community is such a vibrant part of university life, and it's great to have these chances to engage with them directly.

We think of ourselves as a part of the community of arts organizations on campus, including the Smart, the Logan Center, and the Neubauer Collegium, but we're the only independent institution in this group. There has been a sort of dance to navigate this structure and figure out one another's needs and expectations, precisely because the situation is so unique.

AK

You were at the Bergen Kunsthall before. Often in the United States we talk about non-collecting contemporary art institutions as having a "kunsthalle" model—we often say this about the ICA. Is there a difference for you between the European kunsthalle and the American model, or do you feel an ethos in your context that is connected to the European model of contemporary arts organizations?

SØ

Yes, I was with the Bergen Kunsthall for 13 years. I think that there are some crucial similarities in how the Ren and the Bergen Kunsthall are organized. As you mentioned, the lack of a collection is important. It also has to do with the spirit of the institutional model; I feel both the Ren and the Bergen Kunsthall allowed me to work in similar ways, with strong focuses on new production and experimental programming.

The most substantial difference between US and Europe is the funding structure. The boards are much bigger here, because American boards are also funding bodies. The board in Bergen Kunsthall consisted of seven members, while here we have 25 members who pay yearly dues to be on the board. And of course, European institutions get government funding, whereas in America the funding primarily comes from corporations, foundations, or individual donors.

AK

Can we talk a little bit about the structure of the Ren? How many people work there? How many exhibitions do you have a year?

SØ

Our budget is \$1.7–1.8 million per year. As I mentioned, we don't own our own building, so we don't have much overhead. That means that a big portion of our overall budget is actually going directly to artists and production, as well as for publications and programming, which are very important. As of now, we have eight full-time employees and one part-time, so we're quite lean. We typically have four shows per year, usually involving newly commissioned work.

AK

Do you also pay artist fees?

SØ

Yes. But sometimes the artists choose to add the fee to the production budget.

AK

How far out do you plan for your shows usually?

SØ

Had you asked me a year ago, the answer would be embarrassingly short

because we were catching up a lot after our Centennial in 2015. We had eight shows in different places on campus during the celebration and I admit I over-programmed. But now, I feel like we're in a comfortable zone where we have programmed one and a half years ahead.

AK

That's great.

SØ

I don't think it is beneficial for us to plan further ahead. It gives us a flexibility to not miss out on things that we would like to do.

AK

Is it just you and Karsten Lund curating exhibitions, or are there other people as well?

SØ

The curatorial team consists of Associate Curator Karsten Lund and myself. We of course also work closely with the rest of the team conceptualizing the program through continuous discussions.

AK

And what year did you start at the Ren?

SØ

I was hired in 2012, but I had maternity leave, Scandinavian style, so I didn't move until nine months later. I started programming while on my leave in Norway, and then I moved to the U.S. in Spring of 2013.

AK

That's great; that's not the norm in U.S. institutions, as you know. You stepped in to the Ren after a director with a very strong legacy and a curatorial team with a very strong presence. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about what the Ren was like when you arrived, and how you envisioned your directorship.

SØ

I was initially approached by the Board here to come and talk to them. I had followed the Ren and its program all my career. It was part of my curatorial upbringing, in a way, and has always been an important institution for me.

Susanne Ghez and Hamza Walker are both curatorial legends, and the history of the institution is so rich. I grappled with how to balance honoring the Ren's amazing past and moving it forward at the same time. In the beginning, I just dove into the archives and read everything I could.

AK

It looks like your archives are very organized.

SØ

That's not me, that's Karen, our brilliant Director of Publications. I spent a lot of time figuring out what the role of this institution could be in a landscape that looks very different than it did only 10–20 years ago. I was never interested in revolutionizing; that was never my intention. The institution was too precious. Too special. And that's what I told the board: if you want radical change, or blockbusters I'm not your person. Instead, I started little by little to carve out a direction, but I was patient. I decided to strengthen the focus on new commissions. I also learned that taking even relatively small steps—things like updating the website and visual identity, for example—could invite a lot of questions in an institution with so much history.

When it comes to finding our place in a broader institutional context, I recognized that some of the traits that have made us unique are being adopted by larger museums. Before, the Ren could be something of a maverick by showing work that was not so visible in more established museums. Now, those artists are also being shown in the bigger institutions. So, what role could the Ren play in that new landscape? For me, the answer lies in the way we work with artists. Commercial galleries often have the money to make new work, but at the end of the day, the gallery is going to sell that work, which can influence how, or even if, an artist produces it. As for museums, so many of them are becoming such massive organizations that it is difficult to be flexible, to experiment. At the Ren, if an artist just wants to paint the space blue, we'll paint the space blue.

AK

Do you feel that there's been a shift in the artists that you're working with under your leadership? Or do you feel like it's in keeping with the history

of the Ren? Is there a particular mandate for your artist program that you have in a given year?

SØ

I don't actually know how to make a generalization about the artists in that way. We show artists that we feel have important things to say and they all have such individual voices. I wouldn't say that there's a mandate. In Europe oftentimes you're expected to have some kind of manifesto for the institution, because you use that for public fundraising. I was always aggressively against that because I wanted the institution to be flexible.

We discuss this within the team a lot. We try to be a little self-critical and self-questioning: Where are we now? What do we want to say with our program? Are we repeating ourselves? Are we sensitive to questions of diversity and representation? I think it's more relevant for us to program through these questions than through any other rules we might impose on ourselves. For example, while we think it is important to show artists from Chicago and we typically work with local artists every year, we don't want to make this a rule. We discuss the artist we're showing on their own merits.

AK

Do you have a commitment to your local community that is just not explicitly stated?

SØ

It's important. The Ren is very much a Chicago institution. We have strong ties here to the university, to artists and scholars in the city, and of course to our peer institutions large and small. Local networks and collaborations are crucial to the way we work, both in terms of just being active members of the community and also the conversations and opportunities that generates and also more formal program partnerships.

AK

Did you have to rebuild the board when you started or did the previous board come along with you?

SØ

They came along; I've always felt very supported by the board. A few people felt the transition was a natural time to step down, which I understand, but I didn't feel that it had to do with the fact that we changed some things. I'd

say that 60–70 percent stayed and then little by little we built it up with new members. Things have been very smooth.

AK

One question we've asked other people, especially the smaller institutions, is whether the institution is dependent on the vision of one person. Because some people found institutions, or they're directors for a long time, and they can't imagine the organization existing without them. But this is an interesting case where someone was so identified with an institution and there was a transition. It seems like you're continuing the mission, but taking it in new directions.

SØ

That's a really relevant question, especially today. I would say that it's very important for an institution to be independent of its director. However, the director's responsibility is to carve out a direction and to make sure that the program is relevant. So, obviously, the program and the vision are clearly connected to the person that leads that organization in any given time.

AK

Sure, of course.

SØ

I do think, though, that lately there has been too much of a focus on the person instead of the institution in the art world in general. I think that's especially the case in this country. It's a problematic tendency because I think it makes the institutions weaker, not stronger. A director's job is to lead the way. But it's also to create a robust institution, a healthy organization, so that when another person comes in, it can go on.

AK

Right, and then that also encourages collaboration and dialogue as opposed to individual egos duking it out. There are so

many reasons why things are the way they are, but one of them is the funding structure.

SØ

Absolutely. This focus on the director is so connected to how things are funded. Funders need a name and a face. But that's why the way you talk about the institution is so important. Who works there? Who puts in the hours? What are our priorities? If you set this direction from the get-go, then you will start to get to know the institution rather than the director.

AK

We've been saying "institution" a lot. Do you think the Ren is an institution? Is that the word you would use?

SØ

Yes.

TN

I'd like to revisit what you mentioned earlier, about doing this dance in terms of defining the Ren's relationship to the University of Chicago. How do you think your relationship to the university affects your audience? Do you think, in terms of gaining an audience, the Ren's reputation exceeds the university, so to speak?

SØ

There's two questions there. Let me take the last one first. Yes, the Ren's and the university's followings are not always the same. While working in Europe, I did not know that the Renaissance Society was connected to the University of Chicago. I followed the program, I knew the books, I'd read the texts, and I'd seen the posters. In Europe, you can go anywhere and they will know what the Renaissance Society is. They follow our program, but they don't necessarily know about our relationship to the university.

Because of its long history of focused programming, I think that the Ren has established itself as something that professionals would follow. They tend

to be our core audience. When it comes to the world outside our field, they would be more likely to know about the University of Chicago.

It's hard to find our physical space if you haven't been here before, and the Renaissance Society name doesn't literally describe what we do. This is something that my colleagues and I discuss a lot. How can we open up to our audience while keeping our distinct character? One significant problem in the institutional field is that everybody's starting to become really alike. If we can contribute any waves of dissonance in the art world, I think that is great.

TN

That's helpful.

SØ

The Ren is a little "off" because we don't have our own building; it's a little hard to grasp what we are. Even some new board members thought at first that the Ren was actually a part of the university. We don't want to have banners all over town, but we do want to communicate and to be more visible so that people understand who we are. We are finding ways to do this in ways that feel in line with the spirit of the organization.

AK

Could you imagine the Renaissance Society existing in a different location outside of the university campus? Would it still be the Ren?

SØ

I think it would still be the Ren, but I do not want to prioritize fundraising for a new building right now. We did a capital campaign connected to our Centennial, but for me it was much more important to secure the program than to try to expand physically. There were already some investment funds, but we don't have an endowment and we didn't have long-term security in the budget for the programming. We needed that to know what we could offer artists. When I started that campaign, a lot of people said, "You don't own your own building. Why don't you come back when you have a plan for a building and we'll talk?" They want to give money for a building, but it is harder to fundraise for programming.

AK

Sure. It's because people like to put their names on things.

SØ

Exactly. But in the end I started to work with a group of very generous donors that totally got it. The campaign secured a fund of \$5 million to underwrite the production of new work and related programs and publishing. Having this foundation allows us to focus on the artworks and shows.

AK

What have been some of your frustrations? We've talked about a lot of the positive things, but what would you consider a challenge? Frustrations can of course also be productive.

SØ

You mean here, as Director of the Ren?

AK

Specifically with regard to the experiences that you've had in the last five years. What are the biggest road blocks or challenges in your current position?

SØ

The thing I find most challenging is this incredible demand for growth that we're all facing as institutional leaders and professionals in the field. I find that very frustrating and exhausting. And that is the case even for an institution like the Ren, where I actually have the power to say "no" to those demands. I see the pressure that artists are under. It's hard to see this happening in the field that you love—it's getting to be a complete circus. And right now, I'm really struggling with that.

AK

Yes, I think many of us are. Following up on your comment about the gallery sitters and some of the things that you've been trying to do to open up the institution, who do you think of as your audience? And then one of the questions that we've also been asking people, do you think

of your audience as the same thing as your community?

SØ

That's a very good question. I do think that our community is our audience, and vice versa. Realistically, I think our audience is primarily the artists, the scholars, the people already interested in art in general who know about the Ren and follow the program. We work hard to develop and strengthen our relationship with the audience we have.

As you mention, though, we are continuously discussing how to be more open. We're not aimed only at getting people in the door, because there are many ways that our work reaches people beyond our physical space. But we want people to see the amazing work that these artists are doing, and we want to be open and inviting, especially since we recognize that the work we do can be challenging. It is important to create a space where people feel able and welcome to engage with our shows. Our small size, and the intimacy that creates, is an important part of that, I think.

Ultimately, I feel that interactions with art should be first and foremost about the art. Whatever we do to open up, it should never just be about numbers but rather about how people engage with the work in the gallery and how we can support that.

AK

Who do you think of as the Ren's peers? That can also be conceptual; it can be a historical precedence, or it could be other models that are out in the world that maybe aren't even contemporary art.

SØ

The Ren occupies such an in-between space. We're not a traditional museum, but we're called a museum. We're not formally part of the university, but we're located here—our legal name is "The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago." The strength in this is that we can very easily collaborate with smaller organizations, but also with large institutions and museums. For us there is no "natural" institutional collaboration. It makes just as much sense for us to work on projects with the Art Institute of Chicago as the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard. We can fit ourselves into all these different constellations. I will say that we tend to connect most deeply with institutions that are less driven, if we can put it that way, by the corporate demands that have become such a powerful voice in the field.

We find it's harder to collaborate with institutions that feel that they need to follow those demands. I guess our kindred spirits are institutions that set out to work against the instrumentalization of art. It doesn't matter what size they are; they could be major museums or artist-run apartment galleries. That attitude is what's important, that institutional attitude.

AK

You're still relatively new in the institution, finding your ground five years in. That's a good moment to be in. I'm curious to hear about your hopes as you go forward. And your vision for the future, because you could have another 40 years at the Ren too.

SØ

I don't think so. (Laughter)

AK

Maybe it's ten-year vision?

SØ

Yes. Honestly, I don't feel so new anymore. That was more the case those first years were when I was figuring things out and making those changes that I discussed earlier. It's still a big task, of course, and it's still a new landscape, a foreign country. But I feel I am standing on solid ground in my role at the Ren, and I've got a great team around me.

We discuss the future of the institution a lot amongst the staff. From the beginning, I have organized annual staff retreats to Michigan, where we rent a big house by the lake. We spend two days talking about the institution, our individual and collective ideas of what we are and what we could be. Even in our regular staff meetings, we often address those larger institutional questions and not just our practical to-do lists for the upcoming week.

I've seen the fruits of those early steps redirecting more focus onto commissions. I would love to build further on that now that I feel we've gotten up to speed. We've got the machinery. I see the institution as a muscle that gets its strength from the fantastic people working here. I feel really privileged. It's a wonderful and super-sharp team, and at the end of the day, that's what constitutes a good institutional platform.