

Conversation with
JENNY JASKEY,
The Artist's Institute

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

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Jenny Jaskey is Director and
Curator of The Artist's Institute
at Hunter College in New York.

With Alex Klein and Gee Wesley

Since this interview was conducted two years ago, Jenny Jaskey changed the structure of the Artist's Institute so that several artists work on a single project or area of research over the course of a season. The Institute's new mission statement reflects this change:

The Artist's Institute at Hunter College is a research and exhibition space for contemporary artists and writers. Fellows establish semester-long projects that will generate new possibilities for their work. They are encouraged to experiment at the threshold of what they already know, and to use their time with the Institute to test out new forms of expression. Their public programs may take many forms, including exhibitions, performances and lectures, seminars, or something else entirely. In addition, fellows mentor graduate students in the Department of Art & Art History at Hunter College and make use of the school's intellectual and technical resources. The Artist's Institute is committed to artists, above all to giving their work the time and attention it deserves.

The following conversation reflects The Artist's Institute's structure and programming as it was organized in January 2017.

ALEX KLEIN

Can you give us a some
background on The Artist's
Institute and when you started
working there?

JENNY JASKEY

The Artist's Institute was founded in October 2010 by Anthony Huberman, and

I started working with him in January 2012, a year into the program. When he left in 2013, I took over as director. What was unusual, and good, about the shift in leadership was that it was coming from within the institution. It was organic. There wasn't a director from the outside needing to smash everything. At that time, and still, the Artist's Institute was figuring out what it could be.

You could say the Artist's Institute began as an experiment and became an institution. When Anthony left, many of us were asking, could the experiment continue? Was it just an experiment? And it did continue. And it took a lot of work to make that happen.

AK

Yes, and thinking about how much it was initially tied to Anthony, and how much it could be independent of any individual person?

JJ

Certainly part of its charm when it started was that it was tied to this particular first person voice across all the announcements, Anthony's voice, that he still continues at the CCA Wattis. The Artist's Institute's visual identity was connected to that voice too, and it migrated over to the Wattis as well. It begged the question, how much can an institution at this scale be separate from its director or curator?

AK

Because you need to live it to a certain extent, right?

JJ

Yes, there are not layers of people here like at large museums. The Artist's Institute is effectively me and our gallery manager, the artist Christopher Aque.

AK

How many people work at the Artist's Institute?

JJ

Chris and I are the only full-time staff, and we are officially employees of Hunter College. I am a Distinguished Lecturer in the Department of Art and Art History and Chris has an administrative line. The Artist's Institute's

accounting and security are through Hunter, and from time to time, we have work study students. We also work with freelancers—installers, photographers, graphic designers, and technicians who we employ on an as-needed basis from project to project. We have a no internship policy, and everyone working with the Artist’s Institute is paid a minimum of \$15 an hour, though most jobs pay more than that. And every artist gets a fee.

AK

Can you talk about your fee structure?

JJ

We pay artists as much as we can afford to, and never less than W.A.G.E. guidelines. Artist fees have ranged from \$2,500 to as much as \$10,000 for a season. When we have the funds, we give them to artists.

AK

That’s great. I imagine the artists are very present for almost a whole year?

JJ

The length of our working process, from conception to the season itself, lasts around a year, yes. And here I’m talking about the model of showing one artist’s work for half a year’s time. We work with a bunch of other artists and collaborators during any given season for shorter engagements, and their fees are calculated accordingly. We also pay our writers well, around a dollar a word.

AK

That’s good. So, ethics are embedded in the institution. Was that always the case?

JJ

I made the generous artist fees a priority within our budget when I became director.

AK

Structurally, can you talk a little bit about what the rhythm of the seasons is? What is the curatorial process of the Artist’s Institute

and how has it changed under your leadership?

JJ

The Artist's Institute's initial structure was to focus on a single artist for six months at a time. So, two artists a year. That roughly tracks a semester for students, with a little extra.

When Anthony was here, each season's pamphlet text began with the line, "Today we should be thinking about..." It was an insistence: *should*. And contemporary: *today*. In our old space, which was quite small, the rhythm of the institution was slow but persistent. There was one artwork by the artist we were "thinking about" on the back wall that would change every so often. And then the curatorial responses to this work that also changed. The responses might be other artworks, or events with related thinkers. It was fairly casual, nothing was announced too far ahead of time.

The responses developed out of a seminar for graduate students at Hunter—about eight to ten students. For example, if we were thinking about Robert Filliou, a Situationist, then we called the art historian Julia Robinson to give a talk about Situationism. Or when we thought about Filliou's biting sense of humor, that led us to Michael Krebber, and we showed one of his paintings. The program was a call-and-response of what we were thinking about in time. It wasn't a group show, or a survey show. It was just making connections. Making the associations with the contemporary moment.

AK

And also thinking through an artist and their practice.

JJ

Yes. In the early days most of the events were strictly within the realm of art. Whether it was a performance or a writer on politics, the guests had a close proximity to the art field.

When I started working at the Institute, which was during Rosemarie Trockel's season, I was interested in expanding our program beyond the art field proper and finding broader connections. I started having all kinds of people come, who didn't necessarily know anything about art but were of interest to artists.

AK

Did you think about changing the structure after Anthony left?

When Anthony left, we were still learning what that six-month, one-artist structure could produce and how it could be useful to our community. It was clear to me the first person voice needed to go, because the narrator had left. The institutional voice was Anthony's, not mine. It took me a while to solve that.

One way I characterize the change is from "thinking about," to "working with." I wanted to work with living artists to do something that wasn't possible for them in any other institutional context. Something they couldn't or wouldn't do at a commercial gallery or museum. I wondered what histories an artist cared about, what an artist read and researched. Could it be interesting to bring some of that material into view at the institute? To research together?

It became about inquiring. Lucy McKenzie was my first season as director. I asked Lucy what she was thinking about, and she told me she wanted to understand the structure of detective fiction and the archetype of the aging woman. We had a literature professor give a talk on the "stylish spinster" in the work of Muriel Spark, a film historian analyze the aging female star in 1960s horror films, and a pair of true crime television producers talk about how they storyboard a show. Lucy also wrote and directed a short film using Agatha Christie's Miss Marple character, and we helped produce it. Essentially our audience was learning about Lucy via her interests and Lucy was also getting something out of the program to make new work. To me, that has been the most interesting part of the shift from "thinking about" to "working with." It's this feedback loop.

I'm getting off track here a bit, but each season I ask myself, who is our audience? I've noticed that we tend to have a fairly specific audience for each season, made up largely of artists whose work and interests has some affinity with whoever the season is dedicated to. Who is in the audience for Pierre Huyghe's events? Well, it's artists like Sean Raspert, Ian Cheng, and Camille Henrot. They were all part of that season. You could imagine that group of artists being in a research consortium or something. Each season feels like a community built around shared ideas.

AK

When you work with the artists each season, is that a process of you bouncing ideas together or is it the artist saying, "This is what I'd like to see," or is it different each time?

JJ

It's different each time, and largely depends on the artist. For example, Fia Backström wanted to take the institution and its structure as a medium. Carolee Schneemann was curious to know which of her past works were resonant now, and what new things we'd say about them. Pierre Huyghe liked the fact that we didn't have the look and feel of an art museum—that our space felt kind of trashy and was out of the way. He thought he could use that in an interesting way. Our noninstitutionality was productive for him. I go to each artist knowing the work and having a guestimate in my head of an approach that might be appealing to them. Then we brainstorm.

I will add that if there's a formal connection between the artist's work and how we use the six months, that's interesting to me. For Pierre I proposed, what if we think about one artwork for six months? What if our space was an organism or a biotope that grows and changes over time? When talking to Hilton Als, I said, "Well, your books *White Girls* and *The Women* unfold as a series of portraits. What if your season is a series of portraits?" And he ended up making three exhibitions based on people important to him.

AK

So there isn't a predetermined structure.

JJ

From a logistical standpoint, if we think of the season in chunks of three or four, that's helpful. I did lose the "one pamphlet after another and you don't know when they're coming" model and moved to something a little more predictable. That was largely because I was only one person and it was easier for me to manage. And I wanted to focus on fewer artworks with more intensity.

AK

How far in advance do you start working with the artists on their seasons?

JJ

With Sharon Lockhart, we invited her about a year and a half before the season. But with Fia, I invited her only six months before. It varies, but I try to invite artists a year ahead of time.

AK

How do you choose your artists?
I imagine you had to make

sure you have a good working relationship.

JJ

That gets back to your question about the curatorial process and bouncing ideas off of an artist. If there's too big a gap between an artist's interests and my own, it's probably not going to be as good or as fun for us as it could be. I have less to offer. But then again, I always say I like to work with an artist or an idea that scares me just a little bit, whose work I only know the edges of.

In part because we dedicate a graduate seminar to thinking about a single artist, we have tended to work with midcareer or mature artists. There's more to play with there.

AK

You're teaching one class a semester?

JJ

Yes, the Artist's Institute is a semesterlong seminar. Eight to ten students, half artists and half art historians, all grad students enrolled at Hunter. We meet at the Artist's Institute. In our old space, we set up folding chairs and a table in the middle of the exhibition and met there. Here in our new space, we meet in the library, once a week for three hours.

The topic is always the artist, and the artist is a prism into lots of other ideas. So, for Lucy McKenzie's season, we read Dick Hebdige on subculture, articles about Constructivist fashion—anything that helped us get into Lucy's world. Hilton Als' course was a bit of a departure from this format. We read Hilton's writing every week and used it as a model for our own works of creative non-fiction. I invited a professor from Hunter's Creative Writing program, Gabriel Packard, to lead a traditional writing workshop, which was something most of the artists and historians in the class had no experience with. In the final week, we had a reading with Hilton and he gave feedback on everyone's texts.

AK

Do you teach every semester?

JJ

Yes, every semester.

AK

And do the students have any involvement in the exhibition?

JJ

Yes, that's important too. The seminar counts as a credit in the curatorial certificate at Hunter, so students in the class have some general interest in curating and institutions. That curatorial component changes depending on the artist. For Hilton, it was crafting a great piece of writing. For Carolee Schneemann's season, the students curated some of our public program.

AK

How many programs do you do?

JJ

We normally do about two events a month, or twelve events over the course of a half a year. It's a lot.

AK

Especially for a staff of two.

JJ

That's a constant question. Are we doing enough or are we doing too much?

AK

That question doesn't change with the scale of an institution, I would say.

GEE WESLEY

Have the students always had an abiding interest in what this institution is formed to achieve?

JJ

Yes. I don't know that the Artist's Institute could exist if it wasn't connected to students. It's an experience in what a university gallery can be and how artists interact with the university. There's always a public facing part of the Artist's Institute that everybody comes to. And then there's the private facing part as well, like the seminar.

AK

That also begins to answer our question about who your community is.

JJ

We have different communities. There are people who are interested in seeing as much art as they can in New York. They come here to every season no matter what it is. And then there is the community of people who love a particular artist's work—friends, scholars, collectors, other artists. Hunter students and faculty are another community. Many of my students come back year after year, long after they've graduated.

We also have visitors who are not in the art world, but because of the interdisciplinary nature of what we do, they end up here. For example, a sociology student might attend the program of a sociologist here. They have some familiarity with art, and they know a lot about sociology, so they have a way of entering our community as both a novice and an expert, which is interesting.

AK

How do you work with the artists in terms of the scope of what they can do here? When you invite an artist do you say, "This is the budget for the show and you can work within that budget"?

JJ

Yes, I usually tell them what we have available resource-wise, and we think together about how to use it.

AK

I'm assuming you don't have a registrar or that kind of infrastructure?

JJ

Chris Aque, our gallery manager, is our de facto registrar. From our experience, we have a fairly good handle on what we can afford to do here within budget. I do believe that how we spend our money directly reflects our priorities. The budgets of institutions are the greatest indication of what they actually care about and who they serve. In my wildest dreams, eighty percent of our budget would go to artist fees.

AK

What led to the move from the old space back to campus? The original space was very purposely

not on campus, but on the Lower East Side, which would create a different audience in addition to the audience brought in through the seminar.

JJ

The Artist's Institute began on the Lower East Side at Eldridge and Delancey Street in a step-down basement space that was no more than 500 square feet. Part of the reason for the insistence on six months, one artist, was to change the rhythm of the art world. To insist it be in the Lower East Side made more of a statement than having it on the university campus. We were trying to have a dialogue with the art field and to create overlapping communities. Artists from the neighborhood would stop by, and students had to interact.

We rented that space. Then Anthony heard Hunter had acquired the townhouse we're sitting in now, at 65th and Lexington, and he started talking with the president of Hunter, "Hey, that townhouse you just got, what's up with that? Could we maybe use it?"

This was in 2011, and we didn't move in until 2016. The new space has better conditions for showing work—there were certain things I couldn't get on loan for a space without security guards or regulated heating and cooling. We were riding a fine line between being intimate and ungenerous, in that we just couldn't fit the people who would show up to events. Plus rent is covered here.

AK

Which is huge. Did you oversee the buildout of the space and the design?

JJ

Yes, as much as I could. It's climate controlled, and I got to pick the lighting.

AK

Was it important to you to keep having a fireplace?

JJ

It's amazing. If you look at pictures of this space and the old one, it's like the old one just got slightly bigger here, right? It's the same layout. We still have the bookshelves on the left, the fireplace on the right.

AK

It's also nice that you are sitting here when people walk in.

JJ

That's all by design. I was talking to an artist the other day and he was like, "I just love that the Artist's Institute is one of the only places where I can go in and talk to the director. And we'll just talk about art for a little while." It's important to me that someone's sitting here to greet people and talk to them. Like a living catalogue.

We had a couple of artists sit down in that chair today and talk to us about what they thought the relationship was between James Benning, Robert Rauschenberg, and Sharon Lockhart's film.

AK

That's great. That's stimulating for you too.

JJ

It was great. Hilton Als' season was especially meaningful in this regard, since it was all about his relationships with creative people. This meant that the subjects of the artworks he showed, or the friends of those subjects, came in. I regret that I didn't record those conversations! I talked to a man who held Candy Darling's hand when the photograph we showed of her, by Richard Avedon, was being taken. I talked to a man who spent many evenings in the 1970s at the trans bar, GG's Barnum Room, that was pictured here. I talked to students of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about how much her mentorship meant to them. The stories were just incredible. That season became a picture of how the Institute itself functions—it's about real relationships and real conversations.

AK

That's something that we've been thinking a lot about after spending time with Kunsthalle Lissabon. They talk about how relationships are actually what they work on and about their investment in radical hospitality. For them, it's the relationship with the artist that's the heart of what they do and the exhibition is just one stage along the way.

So, it's interesting to hear you talk about relationships because that's been at the core of our conversations as well.

GW

The institution as defined as a set of relationships and by the specifics of those relationships.

JJ

I always think back to Rebecca Quaytman at Orchard, greeting people and talking to them about the artwork and how generous that was. Another point of reference for me is Colin de Land at American Fine Arts. I was talking to Danny McDonald about what Colin was like, and he said you could have gone in there and talked to Colin all afternoon if you wanted to. He would just talk to you at his desk. In terms of "radical hospitality," I'm a little averse to the way the art world seems to label everything, especially with words like radical! For me, it's very basic, and it comes down to actually serving people and caring about them on a human level.

GW

That to me raises questions about institutionalization. You've overseen a lot of internal developments, like ethical wages. At what point in terms of the institutionalization do you think that something becomes too far removed from that kind of connection with the public? Or is that a trajectory that you can't imagine the Artist's Institute ever having? In becoming more and more institutional, growing in scale, or taking on the hierarchies that often come with bureaucracy.

JJ

We experience bureaucracy with the university because they are operating at a huge scale and have many layers of administration.

AK

You said earlier that you'd become institutionalized on some level.

JJ

I guess what I meant is that our existence is now somewhat stable, in terms of more or less consistent funding and people visiting. We also have a brief history. Not that we're stable in terms of an identity, though.

AK

I don't think that institutionalization necessarily has to have a connotation of being negative or positive.

GW

And you don't think of institutions as having to do with scale either.

JJ

No, I think institutions can be small or large. What is important to me is to remember that they are ever changing, never stable. Institutions necessarily embody difference and respond, in time, to what's around them. Institutions will and should grow, but of course growth doesn't necessarily mean getting bigger, it may just describe qualitative change.

We're always asking ourselves what's needed now. What entrenched expectations should we question, even if they're small ones? Lately we've been thinking about how demanding the art field can be on our time, which is really talking about the culture of work in general these days. It seems like there aren't boundaries. How can we approach worktime differently here?

For example, and this is a small thing, but it's often the case that our work goes into the evenings, whether that's staying late to set up chairs, or to host a talk, or to go to dinner with an artist. When I've worked with other curators and institutions, not much care was given for the divide between work life and personal time. Staying late was part of the job, but of course you weren't paid for it. Here we try be mindful of when we're working and when we aren't. So, if we're eating dinner with an artist after an opening or setting up chairs, then we're calling that worktime. And we try not to email or call one another outside of work hours.

AK

That's a great policy, and rare these days.

JJ

I mean this stuff is really hard. But we're talking about our lives!

AK

I know. I know. But you're the director. So, you can make these changes too, which is really good.

JJ

Being creative and making a difference at the level of the institution is rewarding and fun. We can make the institution we want to see. And the institution necessarily has to change as the situation changes. I think it's great you're evaluating what an institution is or what the ICA is or can be. We're doing that too.

AK

What does an institution mean to you?

JJ

Oh, I don't know. I think more about the *Artist's* part of our name than the *Institute* part. I like the possessive, that we're a place where artists have ownership of what happens.

AK

Sure. But if you took out the apostrophe then it would be "Artists Institute." Artists Instituting.

JJ

Oh, I see. Yes.

AK

How did that name come about originally?

JJ

I don't know. Anthony came up with it. A stroke of genius!

AK

Do you think that the valence of the name has changed under the

two different directors?

JJ

I don't know what Anthony would say. It was important to him that it was not the Institute of Art. It was the Artist's Institute. The artist is the focus, and their work was driving the program. I don't think that has changed. I probably moved the possessive away a little bit from the curator or narrator to make it even more of an artist-driven thing.

AK

And maybe "Institute" also reflects the connection with Hunter too.

JJ

Oh yes, sure. Universities usually have institutes.

AK

That's the way we talk about it, because institutes are often places where things are workshopped and they're kind of thought of as laboratories where things can be figured out.

JJ

And the Artist's Institute has always been a place where we learn from art and artists. It's not an institution where we're just learning about stuff from historians or experts on a particular subject. We're learning from the maker. I believe in that kind of presence for the artist within an institution.

AK

Can we talk about the publishing?

JJ

Anthony made a book combining the pamphlets written during those first three years. I wanted to make a publication for each artist, to visualize their world. So, I started a magazine. Each one is different and comes after the season. I like that the magazine diverges slightly from an expected publication format, like a monographic catalog or a reader. It has the casualness of coming to the Artist's Institute and talking to us.

GW

And the seriality of a magazine is great too, with this idea that there's always one more coming, in theory.

JJ

Yes, I like that too. It feels good knowing that these publications exist in time, and we have a record of everything we learned with an artist.

AK

So, in your trajectory, are you with the Artist's Institute for the rest of your life?

JJ

I don't know.

AK

Is it tied to you?

JJ

Oh, no. It doesn't die with me, and it didn't die with Anthony.

AK

We've been talking with people who founded their own institutions and are now trying to set them up to operate without them. But other people feel that their institution needs to die when they leave. There've been a radical range of responses. So, I'm curious, could you imagine what your next step would be?

JJ

I'm actively thinking about that. Not only for myself, but for the Artist's Institute. This format of six months and one artist has been extremely productive. And, in fact, it has spawned many wonderful other projects globally that have taken on these same constraints of a single artist, or of a longer period of engagement.

I've been wondering, with our move uptown, has our audience shifted?

We're in a neighborhood where few artists live and we don't have the nearby community that's vital for an institution of our scale. I also wonder if the Artist's Institute mission and identity is forever tied up with one artist, six months? Is that a mission? Or is that one way of enacting a mission for a time? In other words, could we change the structure or experiment with the structure?

AK

Is there a mission statement for the Artist's Institute?

JJ

There is. "The Artist's Institute works with a single artist for six months on a series of exhibitions and public programs related to their work and interests," or something like that.

AK

Did you rewrite the mission statement?

JJ

I put it into my own words, yes.

AK

So, you're contemplating not immediately moving away from the Artist's Institute, but rethinking its mission.

JJ

Maybe. Or thinking about how our ethos could be communicated through a different structure. I'm just curious. Maybe what I can contribute to the institution is the idea that the institution can change.

I think that it could be quite exciting to say: For six years, the Artist's Institute was this way. For the next three years, it's going to be this way. After that, someone else can come and it'll be some other way. I've lived this institution. There is something here that is ours and that isn't as simple as a single artist for six months, you know.

AK

Could you ever see yourself working in another institution with a different structure?

JJ

I love this scale and proximity to artists. I think what I've missed here is being able to give artists of my generation their first large-scale institutional exhibition. I also haven't been able to make a substantive large-scale group exhibition that would tease out the conceptual or political stakes of new work being made today. I wonder if I am willing to sacrifice the intimacy I enjoy here to be able to do those sorts of things. I'm not sure.

I could imagine going even smaller than this. In my dream life, I simply host dinner parties for artists and writers and make a magazine. Or I start an institution whose funding structure renegotiates the way power works in the art world. I love the history of artists' clubs. The Arts Club in Chicago; the Lotos Club that Mark Twain founded up here on the Upper East Side; or the 10th Street Art Club that the Ab Ex generation started. There are issues of inclusion and privilege and legacy with these sorts of clubs, but why not think through those questions.

AK

One thing we always talk about is our conceptual peers. Who are the Artist's Institute's peer institutions?

JJ

I see my conceptual peers as artist-driven spaces that care about community and intellectual engagement, whether that's Orchard or American Fine Arts or Group Material. I respect the work Lia Gangitano does with Participant and how stubbornly non-commercial it is. I enjoy Blank Forms, and the informality of how they work. Yale Union in Portland. And, though they're taking a break from exhibitions now, Raven Row in London. I also love Secession in Vienna, an institution where artists pick the artists. It feels closer to the artist's studio and it doesn't have an extra administrative layer. There's just like too many layers on stuff! You know what I mean?

Oh, and The Renaissance Society, who, like us, have a close connection to a university. I would say the ICA Philadelphia, too, especially the gallery you give to a curatorial fellow from the Whitney ISP program. That seems to function like an experimental space within your institution, because it's generally organized by someone new to curating.

AK

Yes, and every year or every other year we have a different person. Part of our ethos is that our curatorial team is always

changing because we have a fellow. They stay with us for one to two years. And then just as we're attached to them and they become totally integral to the institution, they have to leave.

JJ

Anthony and I were also inspired by Maria Hlavajova at BAK in Amsterdam, and how she had a zero visitor policy. It didn't matter to the institution if anyone came, so long as what was happening served the artist.

AK

We talk a lot about intimacy at ICA. We think about having, you know, maybe a program with five people and that's a program. That can be a tricky thing for an institution to be okay with because it often needs to be quantifiable, right? But I believe there's a time and place for intimacy in museum work.

JJ

One of the best things MoMA does are those closed roundtable research sessions. Paola Antonelli was hosting some recently for the design department. That's using your resources, your specialist resources, for people who really care.
