

Conversation with
DANIEL FULLER,
Atlanta Contemporary

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

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Daniel Fuller is the curator at Atlanta Contemporary, a site to explore art and culture that features free admission, free parking, and free (good) coffee in Atlanta, GA.

With Tausif Noor

TAUSIF NOOR

One of the questions that I wanted to ask to begin with is if you could just tell us a little bit about your time at Atlanta Contemporary. We know that you've been at Atlanta Contemporary since December of 2014 and prior to that you were at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art. How would you look back on your four years in Atlanta so far?

DANIEL FULLER

I think with institutions like this, there's so little time to look back. In some ways, I'm really envious of what you are doing looking at the history of the ICA Philadelphia. There's so little time to think about the past. We do so many exhibitions and so many projects and we're such an incredibly small staff.

There are two full-time people here, myself and the director, so the idea of taking time to dig into the archives seems almost indulgent. That said, when I first got here, the first exhibition I worked on was an archive show of Nexus Press. As a big art book nerd, Nexus Press was in a lot of ways one of the chief reasons that I took this job, because of that history of making artists' books here at Atlanta Contemporary. I wanted to come down here and dig into that. This was necessary to do as a first project here because you get to a new institution and there are already a couple exhibitions on the books, so you've got some time essentially to figure things out. I used that time to really dig into the history of Nexus Press, which in turn allowed me to dig into the history of Atlanta Contemporary, which then allowed me to dig into the history of contemporary art in Atlanta.

But since then there just isn't time to reflect. Atlanta Contemporary began as an artist-run space started by 18 artists, and they were amazing. They did an incredible job but the fact is, they were artists who really did not keep great documentation, and did not archive things well at all. We don't have a lot of our own history. So if we want to dig into it, I have to go to the

source and I have the contacts, which are folks that lived it here in Atlanta.

TN

In the years that you've been here, is there anything that you've found either particularly frustrating or that you've been surprised by? What's your impression now, having been there for four years and having worked with artists at Atlanta Contemporary?

DF

Similar to working in Portland, Maine, you can do what you want here. There's this tremendous freedom to working in Atlanta. One of the things that I have done in both Maine and here is to invite artists to do a big project, something that is outside of or beyond their normal scale. We commission at least one new piece per exhibition and challenge the artists to try things out. We have that advantage that if it works, cool. If it doesn't work out, we are in Atlanta and probably not that many people saw it anyway.

That advantage is also the incredibly frustrating piece of being in Atlanta; that not nearly enough people see what we do. On arriving here, I was shocked at just how low our attendance was. It has gone up quite a bit, but it's still not where it needs to be. Moving here from Portland, the ICA @ MECA was part of people's lives. Be it students from the Maine College of Art, or everyday good folks in this small city, there was a lot of support for the arts in Portland, Maine.

That's not necessarily the case in Atlanta. There isn't sort of a built-in history of patronage of museums. We have to remember that in Atlanta, so few people are from-here-from-here. I believe 60 percent of the population here was born outside the state of Georgia. We are frequently the poster child for transplants. So, people here weren't taking school bus fourth-grade field trips to Atlanta Contemporary. There isn't this sort of childhood connection. We have to build different bridges.

TN

What is your idea of contemporary? Are the challenges that you're talking about rooted in, or relevant to that idea of contemporary? For instance, the High Museum does have its own modern and contemporary wing, but it also provides, let's say for someone who's not interested in the contemporary, other kinds of art.

DF

I took my son to the High Museum the other day to see the Winnie-the-Pooh exhibition that traveled from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

TN

Oh great.

DF

They have an amazing Outsider Art exhibition that is traveling to them. There's other things that you can see at the High, whereas we're a much smaller institution. When people come to Atlanta Contemporary they are specifically coming to see contemporary art. The High Museum has this great opportunity to trick visitors who come in to see the Winnie the Pooh Exhibition and then say, "Here is some contemporary art," right beside it.

Coming to Atlanta Contemporary is a very specific activity. The High Museum is right in the center of town. On Peachtree Street! The ICA Philadelphia, it's on a fast-moving campus, in a busy part of town, next to Urban Outfitters; there is a subway stop right on your doorstep. Atlanta Contemporary is literally down a side street that consists of mostly parking lots, a couple warehouses, and a rap studio – this being Atlanta. We are literally on Means Street! We are a destination; people don't stumble upon us.

We try and do right by the folks that are doing right by us. We are Atlanta's only free admission art museum; there is free parking; we even have free coffee. We always try have new exhibitions up in the space, and we try and make it fun.

TN

Right. I was reading an interview with you, and I thought you made a really good point about the idea of accessibility and what that means outside the language of a "general" audience. I share the same sentiment as you, where the idea of accessibility is very difficult and a tricky subject because you want to be accessible to the public, but there's no one public right? There's no such thing as a general public. So, thinking about the idea of making contemporary art accessible is not as easy as people might think it is.

I think we have also been grappling with this idea of how to invite people in and make them feel welcome without dumbing down or watering down the artist's work. There's a level of integrity that you have to maintain with the artists and the art that you're working with, but as museums become increasingly neoliberal and focused on getting numbers through the door, dealing all these different elements becomes a balancing act.

DF

There definitely is no one public. And, if you sit back and think: "We have great exhibitions, people need to come to us," you are going to lose. Sometimes as curators, as institutions, we have to be door-to-door salesmen, stepping out of the white cube, bringing art and ideas to the street. A bit ago I did a serious project with a ridiculous title: Once You've Seen One Shopping

Center You've Seen A Mall at the Starlight Drive-In's Saturday Morning Swap Meet. It is something of a Mexican Mercado: folks selling socks, bicycles, sneakers, old televisions, toiletries and toothpaste, etc. out of EZ-Up tents. Every Saturday I'd be up at 3:45am to get a good spot by 4:30 and sit there all day chatting with people about the art I brought and displayed on an easel. Another fun project was a collaboration I did with Alex Robbins, who at the time was a Philosophy professor at Emory University, that we called the 7th Inning School. Essentially, we would invite luminaries from the worlds of art, philosophy, entrepreneurship, nutrition... and we would have them give lectures not in a museum or a classroom, but in the third tier of the Atlanta Braves baseball stadium as a game was going on. We wanted to decentralize things, no one at the front of the classroom, but everyone sitting together in this empty stadium (the Braves stink). We might be talking about Pragmatism or an artist from Paris talking about his new exhibition and then someone might hit a triple and everyone would pause, cheer, talk about how the centerfielder missed the cut-off man otherwise they might have caught the runner... then back to the lecture.

Since we dropped our admission fee, two of our audiences skyrocketed: kids groups — schools that couldn't afford to come through when we charged — and groups of senior citizens. We weren't expecting that at all. All of a sudden, every couple of days, there's another mini-bus pulling up with 12-15 senior citizens. I have a lot of summer days where in the morning, I'm giving a tour to nine-year-olds followed by a tour to 79-year-olds or 83-year-olds at 2PM.

You start out giving the tour differently to each group, and then you realize it all breaks down and you talk about the art the same way. Kids are so smart. A lot of the kids have had crazy lives and can relate to so much. Often, their experiences are very Atlanta-specific and it's so interesting to show them work they get from an artist from Jamaica or New York or wherever. Seniors are the best. You cannot shock them. They've seen it all. They have little to no time for fancy art speak. Brass tacks. When giving them a tour or even thinking about the wall label I'm thinking: "Well what if I were giving this tour to my mother and father?"

TN

It's a good mental exercise for any curator, I think. It's definitely useful to be able to do that.

DF

You can connect anything, any work of art to something that has happened in the life of an 82-year-old's person.

TN

That's a great point. It speaks to the idea of a local context. Despite the challenges of trying to get more visitors and increasing that attendance rate, you do have to deal very closely with the local context. These two groups are actually two ends of the spectrum of local context, so it's interesting that the way that you're working with them is similar. It's also interesting to think about people who grew up outside of Atlanta coming to see contemporary art within Atlanta. Is that something that you've had to deal with, the perennial question of, "Why aren't we showing Atlanta artists?"

DF

Of course – all contemporary art museums deal with their neighbors and artist friends: "Why aren't you showing more of us?" My answer is always that it is my job to bring outside artists in and help Atlanta artists get out. Meaning: shows, press, grants, etc. We recently brought back the Atlanta Biennial and decided that anyone currently living between Florida to Louisiana, up to Arkansas and over to North Carolina, would be eligible. I drove all over the place. Cities and states I'd never been in. Some dirt roads off of dirt roads. Artists from around the South were so excited about someone from Atlanta (and my co-curators) looking at artists in places that don't get a lot of outside studio visits. Artists from Atlanta were psyched to see their work in the context of what is happening all over down here. In the end, one-third of the artists in the exhibition were from Atlanta. Solid, right? But people in Atlanta were pissed! They were so mad that we didn't properly respect the work being made in our own backyard.

TN

I think that's good. Again, it's a tough thing to try to please everyone, right?

DF

You definitely cannot please everyone. Just not possible. Currently, we have all these small project spaces and those are primarily programed with Atlanta artists. I think in the last year and a half we've had eight solo shows by Atlanta artists in those spaces. I say to them: "Listen, this project space is someplace for you to try something new out. You've already shown at the city's two commercial galleries, you've already shown the Museum of Contemporary Art, Georgia. Do something here that no one would expect from you." And we get some great results. These shows are incredible opportunities, but it's also never enough. A project space is not one of the main galleries. But, we worry about what the artists think/want/need and block out everything else.

TN

It also speaks to, in my opinion, a very artist-centric mission. You have the

studio artist program, which is really unique. It seems like a very artist-centric museum, where you're thinking of these artists' careers in the long term. What you said about finding Atlanta artists and allowing them to have exhibitions outside of Atlanta indicates that you're thinking the trajectory of their career. I was wondering if you could speak a little about the studio program and Atlanta Contemporary's artist-centered mission.

DF

It's really unique to have studios right here at the museum. That was another thing when taking this job — I really liked working with students when I was at the Maine College of Art, and having the creation of art being right in the same building as us. There is a tremendous energy that comes with it. Granted, it's not hundreds of students, it's 14 terrific artists. The program is partially subsidized by the state and partially by a big donor here in town. They are easily the cheapest and nicest studios in town. Beautiful, large spaces. The artists in the program apply for three years terms. I recently set up a show of Studio Artists in Nashville and have another coming up in Chattanooga. We recently took a field trip together to the High Museum for a private curator's tour of a new exhibition. We frequently break out the grill and cook for them when a visiting artist is at Atlanta Contemporary for a few days. It's a community.

TN

It's a different energy, right?

DF

Two of Atlanta Contemporary's biggest events of the year are the Open Studios nights. They are a great barometer of what is happening in Atlanta at the moment. My hope is to have it a one stop shop for curators visiting from out of town that want to see what is happening here.

TN

That's an idea of contemporary outside of the institutional definition of say, art that's made after 1980, and instead, contemporary as in what's really happening now, in-process. In line with that, what are some other contemporary places that you'd consider Atlanta Contemporary to be in dialogue with? Your studio program, for instance, reminds me a little bit of the Whitney ISP. Who are your peers, in size or conceptually?

DF

Last year I was on a panel with Wassan Al-Khudhairi, from the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Andria Hickey, who up until a couple days ago was the curator of MOCA Cleveland. I felt a real kinship talking with them about

being the contemporary museum in a region, working in conservative states, having co-workers that this is their first position in a museum, etc.

Being aspirational, I really love the programming at MOCA Detroit. I believe we do somewhat similar exhibitions, but their other programs are exactly what I would dream of doing. Last year I made it to the museum several times and each time there was some sort of public program going on the space was packed with kids, families. It was loud, exciting, packed with fun. The doors seemed to always be open to whoever wanted to come in. So, I really connect with their programming.

More and more I feel like I'm looking at spaces overseas. Kunsthaus Glarus, Bergen Kunsthall, Kunsthall Stavanger, Vienna Secession, etc. When the artist Joel Holmberg had a solo show at Atlanta Contemporary he said to me, "It feels more loose down here. It feels more European. It feels just like the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam." I was like, "Oh, good."

TN

I think that's awesome, and in our research we've been trying to be very flexible. We've talked to people in London; we've been in dialogue with a group in Senegal called RAW Material Company; and we've been talking to the Kunsthalle Lissabon.

DF

That is something the ICA Philadelphia has always done extremely well. When I first moved to Philly there was the opening of the Locally Localized Gravity exhibition. It was this massive celebration of the city. The ICA continuously mounts these incredibly important shows with artists from around the world, without ever turning their back on the home team either. It's an important reminder for me to always appreciate what is happening in Atlanta. To always be a good member of the community.

TN

A technical question I had is, how does the funding for Atlanta Contemporary work?

DF

It's terrible. I mean it's terrible everywhere, but it is worse here. In 2017 Georgia ranked 49th in the country for state arts funding. We dropped down from 48th in 2016, there is not much room to sink lower. Year after year Georgia has cut and reduced the arts budget by 90% of what it once was. So, things are tough!

In regards to funding from individual donors, that can be difficult as well. My theory is this: it goes back to the fact that so few people are from here. They don't plan on dying here. Donors want to put their name on a gallery in a

place that their grandkids can see it.

Donors want to build a legacy in a place that they are tightly connected to. A hometown, a birthplace. Atlanta is this tremendous city for business. There's so many big, big companies (Coca-Cola, Home Depot, Delta Air Lines, Mercedes, Porsche, the massive Tyler Perry Studios) which leads to a lot of people moving here to make a lot of money in a relatively short amount of time and then retiring further south to an island somewhere.

It's a challenge just like it is anywhere else. We scrape by and do what we can. I'm continuously shocked with what we're able to do with the minuscule amount of money we have to do it with. Kansas is the only state with less funding than us, so my heart goes out to museums there.

TN

Do have to spend part of your time fundraising?

DF

Yeah, there are projects that if I want to get done, I have to get the money myself. One thing that is unique about my job is that with all of the project spaces I am curating 30 + shows a year. It's a crazy schedule. Because of that, the director told me long ago to focus on the exhibitions and she will focus on getting the money for it. I end up doing what needs to be done to get the shows on the wall and that requires a lot of spending out of pocket. I (maybe) jokingly refer to myself as the second largest donor to the museum.

TN

Sometimes when you have a small amount of money, you're forced to figure out what you really want to do and be super sharp about it.

DF

You get creative. We truly have no money, but to be totally honest with you I don't think there's been a single project that I've wanted to do that hasn't happened because we didn't have the money. We figure it out. One thing that is incredible about Atlanta Contemporary is that with every exhibition we commission a new work and/or give an honorarium for every show. We send every artist who exhibits here away with something. A token of genuine appreciation for what they do in the world.
