

Conversation with BISI SILVA, CCA Lagos

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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Bisi Silva was the founder and director of the Center for Contemporary Art, Lagos, Nigeria and Àsikò, a platform for artistic and curatorial pedagogy across Africa. She passed away on February 12, 2019. This interview was conducted in Fall 2016 and reflects her thinking at the time.

With Alex Klein and Gee Wesley

ALEX KLEIN:

What led to your decision to found the Center for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA Lagos) and what was the context for its founding?

BISI SILVA:

CCA Lagos was founded in 2007, nearly ten years ago, to provide a more experimental platform for contemporary artistic and curatorial practice within a Nigerian and West African context. After twenty years of military dictatorship in Nigeria, the local arts scene was extremely conservative and principally commercial—commercial because the government doesn't fund culture, curatorial projects, or anything of the like. Very few spaces existed for artists who weren't commercial and wanted to experiment and push the parameters of their practice.

CCA started focusing mainly on lens-based media. Photography was still considered a copy, or a vocational trade: You go out and you take wedding pictures, birthday pictures, and you have a studio and you make your money. Although we had a very long and deep history of documentary photography and street photography, these were artists working in the margins of the visual arts sector, and we wanted to bring that conversation center stage. Video art didn't exist. As far as performance art goes, I think there was one performance artist. It was the early days of a lot of the dynamic artistic practices that were coming to the forefront and we considered CCA a space for critical engagement, a laboratory for experimentation, and in a way, a safe space.

Before I opened CCA, I used to live in the UK, and I would come to Nigeria on holidays. I'll never forget this artist who asked if I could come do a studio visit. He was a painter, and it was all sort of hush-hush, so I thought to myself, "OK, what's going on? This is all a bit weird." When we went into the studio, he had his easel covered. It was so dramatic, now that I'm thinking about it. He lifted the cloth off and said, "This is the work." And I thought to myself, "Ok, and..." And he said, "Is it OK?"

He was doing these collages with photography and at the time nobody was doing that in Nigeria. He wasn't even sure about what he was doing, and why, and if it was acceptable. I could see that he was really trying to engage and ask "Is it OK what I'm doing, can I do this?" And I was like, "Of course you can! Why can't you?" At the time, I didn't really understand the context, because I lived in the UK and to me it was no big deal, but to him, it was such a big deal. That is the context I was operating in. On another occasion, I went to give a talk at one of the universities, and I remember after the lecture, one of the young students came up to me and said she was creating a work where she was soaking bread, letting it dry and creating these sculptures. She asked me, "Is it OK to use bread as a material?" And I said, "Of course!"

AK:

Having artistic freedom or feeling like one has permission to produce anything under the rubric of contemporary art is something that is so often taken for granted.

BS:

Exactly! They were asking me, "Can I do this?" because they'd been taught that painting and sculpture—from wood, metal—is art and anything outside of that is not art, which is why they were asking me all of these questions, this being about a decade ago. That is why I say that in a way, CCA has been a safe haven for artists who wanted to experiment. We were there to defend what they were doing. It wasn't about whether it was good or not good, but defending that they have these ideas and they want to explore, and defending artists who want to move outside of the normal, conservative parameters.

It was really interesting to be able to engage with the local scene that I wasn't really a part of because I only moved to Nigeria in 2002 and set up CCA five years later. I was taking the time to really get to know the art scene and not just jump in and say, "This is how we do it in London, therefore this is how it should be done." I was really trying to understand what was already on the ground, what was missing, and where I could come in and share some of my skills and experience, but also learn more about my country. I left Nigeria

when I was very young—I did my primary school in Nigeria, and then from age 11 upwards, I was in Europe. So, there was exchange and dialogue from the beginning.

AK:

How were you able to go back and not impose on the space that you were working in?

BS:

That was very, very important. When we set up CCA, it was initially supposed to be just a library or art center and research resource, not so much a gallery, because I felt those resources were needed more. There were very, very few platforms for critical engagement, for discussions, for crits—for anything like that. My thinking was that we have quite a few galleries, so if I wanted to do a project, then I could do it in those spaces; I don't need to replicate them. But the universities had been sort of decimated because of a military regime that did not invest in education. The books were out of date, there was an isolation from what was happening in the global art scene, and few artists could travel. I reasoned that the best way was through books, having access to information—having access to knowledge. But then I thought, "All this is great—they can pore over all these books. But still there's this distance from the reality." That's why at the same time, we decided to open the art space to do workshops, talks, seminars, and exhibitions.

AK:

Did the library and the exhibition space come about at the same time?

BS:

Yes, they did. They opened the same day.

AK:

But conceptually it started with the library.

BS:

It started with the library. I wasn't interested in opening an art space at all.

AK:

Right, right. So, it was initially imagined more as a resource.

BS:

Yes, a resource and research space. For example, there are a lot of photographers, but there are no photography courses. So, most photographers either study abroad, go on residencies, are self-taught, or use the apprenticeship system. We've now developed a fairly substantial section of books and journals on photography and the young photographers come and spend a lot of time with them.

AK:

Right, and of course, the book is central to the history of photography and the way knowledge is transmitted between artists.

BS:

Exactly, so that's been very, very useful for a lot of photographers.

AK:

That's great. What were you doing in those five years between 2002 and 2007? Was it really just exploring? What was your day job?

BS:

What I thought was that there was no funding for the arts. When I was in the UK, I worked as a project manager in the corporate sector, in IT, working with websites through the dot-com era. I worked on the user interface—the design and content—and I thought I was going to go to Nigeria and set up a web company, in the hopes that it would generate enough income to fund the art space. I did that for three years, and it didn't work out, so I closed it down and then worked independently for two years researching, setting up a space and thinking about funding. I traveled quite a bit and met a lot of funders. We are funded by international foundations. We've never received any money from the Nigerian government or corporate sector. I did a couple of independent curatorial projects and consultancy work, just to keep living. And then I began working on CCA in 2006. I got a space at the beginning of 2007, and more or less used my own savings to start the space.

It was driven by an exhibition that I wanted to do on the body and sexuality—that kind of exhibition had never happened in Nigeria. I was trying to collaborate with the Goethe Institut and for over a one-year period the director told me, "Yes, let's do it! Great, let's get going." Then two months

later the director said, "I don't think we should. I don't want to upset the authorities..." So, I leave it and then a month later the director was like, "You know what? Who cares about the authorities, let's do it!" I keep going, then a month later, "No, I don't think we should." That went on for twelve months and a friend of mine said, "Look, Bisi. This is what's going to be happening to you. Until you open a space, you're not going to be able to do the projects that you want to do."

That is what really kick-started CCA, not only as a library, but also as an exhibition space. I thought that the fact that what I wanted to do was being censored meant that it was out of my power and would be problematic in developing the kinds of programs that I wanted to do, which focused more on social issues. I wasn't a commercial gallery; I'm not interested in selling. If the Goethe Institut, which gets funding from the federal government of Germany, is worried about a show such as this, what would the commercial galleries say? I mean, I can't even go to the commercial galleries. They'd be like, "Are you for real? None of our collectors will buy this kind of work." The exhibition that developed was *Like a Virgin*, which took place in 2008–9 with Zanele Muholi and a Nigerian photographer named Lucy Azubuike. It was a really interesting exhibition, very powerful within a Nigerian context, very confrontational, very provocative. But also, I think the response was split almost fifty-fifty: Those who accepted it and thought, "It's about time, it's important, it's informative, it's radical." Others thought it was disgusting, pornographic. It was split. I just handled it based on the response that I got and was interested in engaging with people who were essentially conservative and very religious.

AK:

Who was your audience?

BS:

My audience was very general. We were open to everyone, which includes of course, professional artists, students. Our location in Lagos is not in the high-brow area where most of the galleries are, but in what I call the "educational nerve center" of Lagos, where in any direction we're a 10–15 minute drive from the University of Lagos, from the College of Further Education, from the Yaba College of Technology, and a host of secondary schools that were set up at the beginning of the 20th century by the missionaries: the Methodist Girls High School, Our Lady of Apostles, Queens College, all these secondary schools within the vicinity.

It's a very interesting area. It's one of the first areas that was developed by the colonial British government at the beginning of the 20th century for middle-class Nigerian professionals who worked with the railway. The urban planning of the whole area was with an interest in Brazilian-influenced

architecture. I really like it, because of the history. You still have families living in the houses; sometimes three generations are living there. We had people from the neighborhood, we had students, we had just art and culture lovers, and that remains the audience today. There are very few collectors. Once in a while, we have an artist who has a good collector base. We do invite artists who work in that way, but we invite them to do different kinds of work that are not commercial and that gives them the space to really experiment beyond the traditional paintings or sculpture that they do. Once in a while, their collectors come with them, thinking there's work to be bought. I remember I had a collector who came in once and was like, "So where's the exhibition?" I tell him, "You're in it." But he says, "I don't get it. Where is the work I can buy?"

AK:

Right. You're working in a space that you've created for people to actually try different things outside of the pressures of the market and the school system. Does receiving funding from an international context relieve you from some of the pressures of having to fulfill the expectations of the government?

BS:

Definitely, I don't need to deal with the government. I'm totally independent from them, but also from the market. I've also been lucky with my funders. I worked with agencies that really do understand contemporary art. I was supported in the first year by the Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands. Their director Els van der Plas is an art historian, and their mission is to support art in Africa, Asia and Latin America; basically, the Global South. They really got it, and they funded me for the first 18 months to do a series of programs, to really consolidate my position, and use that as a platform to approach other funders. It was absolutely wonderful to be able to do that. They understood what I was trying to do; they didn't interfere.

AK:

Does having international funding open a dialogue with a larger audience outside of your immediate context?

BS:

It does to a certain extent, because when you have funding, you have a little bit more money to advertise and publicize and reach out. And I wanted to do that as well, because as I said, we'd been through 20 years of a brutal military dictatorship. The art sector was really closed; it had been isolated for 20 years or more, and I was thinking, "How do we develop a local discourse but also engage with a global art sector without necessarily having to go there?" It's good that people know what we're doing, so that we can have a conversation with them and hopefully some people can go out and others can come in. So, we brought in a lot of different artists.

The first thing that I would say that we did in the first three years was to have lots and lots of talks, because even the discourse had stagnated. Another of the reasons that I wanted to do the research library was an experience that I had with an artist where I was talking about Documenta and this guy was drawing a blank. So, I stopped and asked, "You know, Documenta in Germany that happens every five years?" And he was like, "No..." It was such a weird conversation, because I was like, "You're an artist, aren't you?" And he said, "Yes I am. I went to the university and I have my BA and my MFA in art." He'd been practicing for at least ten years. And I'm like, "You're not even a young artist, you're a mid-career artist, and you haven't heard of Documenta?" He was like, "Bisi, I'm sorry, I haven't." As if, "Get over it. That's not my world!" Whereas I'm coming from the UK and that's my world. I had to calm down. But in my mind, I was thinking, "Shit. They don't know what's going on. What can I do?" Which is, of course, why I kept thinking that I needed to set up the library so that people have access to information. It was about access, and not necessarily through making art—through knowledge. You can imagine, even though I'm Nigerian, that I was coming across these tensions, friendly tensions. That's part of the learning on my part as well. I'm really trying my best not to make people feel as if they don't know—because I don't know as well. For me to think that everybody knows Documenta—why would they?

AK:

And maybe the other question is
"Is it important?"

BS:

That is it! That's why he was like, "Get over it. Because it's not part of my reality."

AK:

That brings up so many
interesting points. Gee and I were
thinking about this a lot when

we were in Korea. How much should it be about bringing artists into the world of something like Documenta, or is it preferable to provide another set of opportunities for artists to maybe make their own Documenta in a manner that is relevant to them? How do we be global and inclusive without imposing hierarchies or colonial thinking on a situation?

BS:

That's it. That's what I've learnt over the last 10–15 years—it's about decentering. I had to unlearn, of course, a lot of what I had learned, and in the process of unlearning, use what I had learned, because it is useful, to hopefully try and create a new form of learning that's specific to the local context. I think that's where I am now, after that initial process has taken place and I'm now in a place where I feel comfortable with what I knew, my experiences in the West. I feel extremely comfortable and confident in my experiences in Nigeria and across the African continent.

AK:

Nigeria is different from other countries in Africa. Do you see your work as being really specific to the Nigerian context is it applicable across the African diaspora?

BS:

I think it opens up. That was really important, to have this dialogue with other countries across the continent, and that has reflected in the project that I do called Àsikò, which is a Pan-African roaming art academy. You were talking about your thinking about the ICA and its 50 years, and what kinds of formats to consider as we move forward. Those have been some of the issues that I've been thinking about as well. Over the last two years also, I've started this process of thinking, "What next? How do we move forward? What could the future look like within this context?" First and foremost, it's really knowing that I am not particularly interested in this idea of institutions. I tell people that CCA is not an institution, it's a project.

AK:

That's precisely one of my questions!

BS:

At the end of the day, I've always worked on projects. I've never really been employed day-to-day anywhere in my professional life. I've stayed within an organization, working on different projects, and I think that suits my mentality. And the idea of thinking of CCA as an institution—I just can't get my head around it. The way I can develop it, stay within it, is if I think of it as a project.

AK:

I absolutely know the feeling. I often think of my own work within institutions where I have worked as project-based.

BS:

Exactly, that's important. Over the last two years I've been thinking about what happens with the project. How do you renew it? There's always this discussion, especially within the African context, that a lot of the institutions, organizations, and even corporate companies are a one-man or one-woman affair, so when the founder dies, the institution or the organization dies. I wouldn't like that to happen with CCA, but at the same time, I don't see it becoming like MoMA, for example. Not that it shouldn't be, but in my lifetime, I'm not going to be the one to do it.

AK:

Would you want it to be a MoMA, though?

BS:

I'm very open. If somebody wants to come in and take CCA and say, the next stage is for it to now begin to become institutionalized—as in, the institute becomes institutionalized—that's OK.

AK:

How much do you self-identify with it, and how much does the institution or the organization need you to survive? It sounds like you're setting it up so it's kind of self-sufficient.

BS:

Not really. What I've decided is that if it's a project, a project can either evolve into something else, which could be an institution, or it can die. Next year is the tenth year of CCA, and unless another idea comes on board, it will die as it exists today and in the format that it exists today. The idea is to do the tenth year and close it.

AK:

Oh wow. Where would the library go?

BS:

What I really would like to do is set it up as a research center. I'm hoping I can get a purpose-built building, in an ideal world—these are just hopes and dreams—and that's the starting point to making it a reality, to close the gallery space, or the idea of programming every two or three months, close that space down.

The library is getting bigger and I do want to work on the library and begin to use the library as the activator for my curatorial practice. I'm interested in documentation, in public education, and more research—slowing down. Instead of doing exhibitions every two or three months, maybe doing a major project every 2–3 years that's research-driven and using the library as a starting point to look at different mediums: book arts, printing processes, works on paper, I don't know! There's a lot of interesting material, especially archival material which has never been accessible to people before that I'm beginning to collate. And there are all these trails that I want to follow on earlier artists. I'm interested in doing a three-year research project on the history of Nigerian women artists, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Within that there will be talks, exhibitions, presentations.

AK:

Right. And those could go elsewhere.

BS:

Exactly.

AK:

Do you view this as a hub for those research-driven projects?

BS:

Exactly.

AK:

So, in a way the culmination of CCA with the ten-year anniversary is to prevent it from getting too sedimented.

BS:

Exactly; then it becomes a 9 to 5.

AK:

Right. ICA thinks of itself as quite scrappy and independent, compared to the big museums in the US, so it was quite a shock, when we participated in the *To All the Contributing Factors* forum in Gwangju and everyone was looking at us as a big institution. Usually when we go to these forums, we're the little guys—the experimenters, the radical people.

BS:

With CCA, there's me and my office manager. We all do ten different things! I do 20 things, my office manager does five to ten things, the support person, she does five things, and then I have two part-time or project-based coordinators and curators. It's almost zilch, and I'm not there half of the time.

AK:

I was going to say, you're traveling so much, so how is it running? Do people just come to use the library? Do the talks happen when you're not there?

BS:

Sometimes they do. Sometimes we have exhibitions and they can run for three months. I quite like it because when I do exhibitions, I work very closely with the artists, especially if they're based in Lagos. They've grown with CCA, so we actually have an extended family, I would say. Everybody knows I move around, and they just get on with it. So once the exhibition is up we know we are going to do some talks, the artists are happy to do that. They're very

resourceful—it's their space and they can do whatever they want if I'm not around, because we know each other, they know the space, they know my audience, and they've worked with me at some point or other. So, it works. It's slower, but it can still function if I'm not around.

AK:

You've now fostered this whole new generation of artists that are coming up. What are they going to do when CCA closes?

BS:

I think that's really good, and I think that's another reason it's important, that they shouldn't get too comfortable. Sometimes that happens, where artists want to show mainly at CCA or work with me. I'm happy to work with an artist once, maybe twice, but I know that after a while it becomes their comfort zone, and I tell them that: "Yes, I'd love to work with you on this project, but I'm not going to, so you go out into the world and find the space, find whoever you're going to work with." I think it's like pushing them out of the house to go grow up. That's what's going to happen, and not only that, but it's also about generosity. You go and train other young artists, you nurture and mentor other artists as well, so that it's not just me doing it. The idea is to share information so that you can continue sharing and then the next generation that you bring up, they share with the next as well.

AK:

Have you fostered also a group of critics and curators out of that situation? Did any of them also continue the work you've been doing?

BS:

Yes, exactly. That's really the idea, in doing the Àsikò Pan-African roaming art school. It's about sharing skills, knowledge, information, not only in the country, but across the continent.

AK:

In different contexts.

BS:

In different contexts. Learning about those contexts, really getting a good insight into what happens across the continent, in the different countries, the different histories, specificities. We've done six editions. When I set it up, I wanted to do just five. We got a bit of funding, so we did six. We did two in Nigeria, and then started opening up. I wanted to do one Anglophone country that's outside of Nigeria, so we went to Ghana; one Francophone country, so we went to Dakar; and one Lusophone country, so we went to Mozambique, which is in Southern Africa. We did West Africa and Southern Africa. When we got extra funding, we decided to move up towards the North and to the Horn of Africa—we went to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, for instance—for lots of different reasons. One was for its history, its ancient history—it's the only African country that's not been colonized and it's the headquarters of the African Union. I thought it was a befitting place for the Àsikò program to end in the format in which it exists today.

But of course, as we've been doing the project, there's been a lot of requests from different African countries, many artists and other curators, to come and hold an Àsikò in their countries. I can see the need for the program, but I don't want to be the one driving it. I want to hand over the idea to somebody else. I'm taking a sabbatical year where I interact with some of the people in the countries that have taken part. We've already worked with about 90 participants, of which 13 are curators, from about 11 countries across Africa. In total, we've worked with about 15 or 16 participants from those countries. The idea is that from that group of about 80 people, we can select three that can take on Àsikò for the next two to three years, and then it becomes a rotating system where the three will train a new generation and then after their three years, they can pick three from the new generation to take over, and then those three will train another one. I don't know if it's going to work, but that's how I'm thinking. That also comes back to your interesting questions around the formats. At the moment, we're just a roaming art school. Are we going to birth somewhere and create something new?

AK:

Right—does it need a building?
Does it need that kind of
infrastructure?

BS:

Exactly, that will be the next question over the next three years. In my mind, it does. My dream would be to find an African country like Botswana that can give us a lot of land, acres of land, and we can build a residency and school system where there are 12 or 14 studios, and artists can come there for three months. It could be hired out the rest of the year for people to do events and

their own thing. I don't think the school, at least while I'm around, needs to function for more than three months really.

The program we do at the moment runs for five weeks. It's extremely intensive. We have about 14–16 participants. This year we had 16 participants—12 artists and four curators. We have a roving faculty, so we have about 15–20 faculty that come in for a week. We have three or four a week and they do intensives. Then, the next week it changes, and another group comes, and then the next week it changes.

AK:

So, it's almost like a low-residency program.

BS:

Exactly, yes. It's really, really intensive, and then they do a project at the end of it. I think that seems to me a fairly good format, but whoever comes in can change it. There's nothing set in stone. I see myself more as an initiator, somebody who sets things up and then hopefully can hand them over. Other people can give their input, and take it. My attitude is you take it, you do what you like. You can either grind it to the ground or you can take it to the next stage.

AK:

So, it's not hinged to your ego and your identity.

BS:

No, no, because I can't maintain that.

AK:

Exactly.

BS:

In order to do that I'd have to be there on a daily basis.

AK:

24/7. These things all require presence.

BS:

Exactly, yes.

GEE WESLEY:

In terms of the participants and the faculty, is there an ideal geographic composition that you're thinking of?

BS:

With regards to the participants, they must be based in Africa, so we've never invited anybody from the diaspora, although we've had a lot of applicants. Also, the reason that the program was set up was for participants who haven't really had the opportunity to travel. Some of them have never even been outside of their own country to another African country.

AK:

Right, so it's not for the African artists that are studying in France and coming back.

BS:

No, no. We get a lot of those PhDs and I'm like, hello? Didn't you read the information? "I've got an MFA, I'm doing a three-year PhD," and I'm like, you know...

AK:

They already have access to resources and infrastructure.

BS:

Exactly! You know, they should be coming to teach, not to be the students. Although I understand the experience—what they want to do is engage with us on the continent. Even at that level, I'm sure that there's a lot that can be gained because it's really interesting observing the artists. We've had artists from America, for example, African-American and Euro-Americans. We had an artist here, Carrie Schneider, and I remember just watching her and afterwards I said, "You seemed a bit uncomfortable earlier on." Not in a negative way, but she was uncomfortable because all of a sudden it dawned on her she was the only white person in this sea of black people and she'd never been in that context before. She became conscious of her whiteness, if you wish.

That was really interesting because I always tell everyone that there's a flat hierarchy: Everybody's learning, even if you're a professor. In this context, you don't have all the knowledge, so you're learning as well. Even if you have access to knowledge in your country, in this context you're a novice. You have to re-learn about yourself, about what you know. We've had African-

Americans as well who've come to lecture. We had one curator who was talking about this wonderful project that she did in New York, and afterwards the students were like, "OK, and?" You could see the shock on her face because she was talking about African-American history, but they didn't really have the context to understand that in America this kind of exhibition is a big deal. You could see her shaking her head, almost trying to figure out, "What are they talking about? This *is* important!"

AK:

Right, right. But to *whom* is it important?

BS:

Exactly! Afterward, she was like, "Wow, Bisi, that was really challenging, because it really made me think about what I'm saying, who I'm saying it for, and how am I saying it!" We've had a professor, Professor Tamar Garb, who has actually been following us around with all the Àsikò programs. She's been on four out of six. She's of South African origin, left during the height of apartheid, and moved to the UK. She's at UCL. She studied fine art, but then became an art historian, and hadn't really engaged much with Africa over the last 20–30 years. I invited her to Àsikò and she really, really just loved it because she's an expert in feminist art history and 19th-century art history. Here she was with these Africans, engaging with them, trying to understand them. They're trying to understand her, she's trying to also engage with her past as an African. There was confusion, and really complex systems going—really, really interesting. But in it all, she's been amazing, and really been able to use her knowledge as an educator, but also a specialist in her field, to communicate with the participants, whether they have an art history background or not, whether they have an art education background, which a lot of people in East Africa don't. I think there are two art schools outside of South Africa that serve that region and that's Makerere University in Uganda and the Addis Ababa School of Fine Arts, and everyone else is in vocational schools or learning by apprenticeship. They don't have that vocabulary, they don't have that critical knowledge. Of course, some of them go on residencies, they have their own small libraries, but in most cases they're working in isolation—these are places that curators don't go to, so there are few curators coming in.

AK:

Do they have access to the internet?

BS:

A little bit, in some places, but it's expensive in some places as well. And even when they do, do they really know how to use it?

AK:

They don't know where to look.

BS:

Exactly. Where *do* you look?

AK:

And it's all about where to look and how to look.

BS:

Exactly, that is it. All these issues. The digital divide is real. They have access, but at the same time they don't have access, or they don't know *how* to access it.

AK:

Do the students come from different countries or are they specifically from wherever it's being held?

BS:

No, they're from all over. Usually for each edition we have an average of between 8–10 different countries. That's fascinating as well.

AK:

Is there much dialogue between the different scenes?

BS:

Not usually, which is why we wanted to start roaming.

AK:

There's often a flattening of the African continent in the United States. It's an obvious thing to say, but each country is a such different context with specific histories, political situations,

different languages, and cultural situations.

BS:

Definitely. I find it really fascinating. It's also interesting looking at the dynamics of West Africans and East Africans.

AK:

Does the school ever include North Africans?

BS:

We haven't had any. That's why I wanted to move a little bit up to the Horn of Africa, so that we can engage. But as we start the next sessions, that's going to definitely be part of it, and hopefully we can even do one because that's a really complex situation. I'm almost saying, I hope it's not me dealing with it. Because it's so complex, what's going on with the situation between the more Arab North and the south of Sahara histories.

GW:

In the writing about your work, I love the fact that the terms "infrastructure" and "arts infrastructure" come up, because it's not a term that I hear mentioned in a US context. In Philadelphia, there are art schools, art nonprofits, art commercial institutions and a robust infrastructure, both critical and commercial. I was wondering, in part, how your work functions as an incubator for proliferating and strengthening an infrastructure in the context of West Africa. Have you seen over the past ten years the development of other organizational models that have taken stock of the work that you've done and have tried to develop new strategies?

BS:

I think that within Nigeria that is extremely visible, and that's also what allows me to say that I can close down the gallery, because new spaces have opened up—different kinds of spaces, whether it's small and artist-run or whether it's wives or daughters of billionaires that have opened up huge spaces. It's now become the "in" thing to stage auctions, and we now have two auctions in Nigeria.

AK:

And this is all within the last ten years?

BS:

All within the last ten years. We're now going to have the first art fair that's starting in November.

AK:

Will you be involved in that?

BS:

I am. They've invited me as the artistic director for the curated section, to engage with the artists. That's going to be in November of this year. So, there is this ecosystem and infrastructure that's developing, and I think for me what's really happened that's great is the fact that when I started it was mainly commercial, with very little critical discourse. Now, anybody that can is doing residencies and you have foundations. The auction house has an art foundation that they set up and they do exhibitions, residencies, and publications. You have other artist initiatives that are coming up, are trying to set up, or have set up smaller, informal spaces. It's really quite dynamic and really vibrant in Nigeria today, and I think that's going to continue to grow. You have art magazines that are coming up. There's a young lady that started an online art magazine; she's now launched the first printed version. New galleries are coming up and the gallery scene is becoming more professional, because usually they would just show what might sell, but now galleries are representing artists, which means a bigger commitment to the artist's career. The billionaires' wives and daughters have a bit more money to commission artists.

With the financial support of one of these galleries, an artist I've worked with for many years is creating a new ambitious body of work and that's amazing. It's almost unheard of. We have collectors who have actually been the sole benefactors of the art scene. We have one amazing collector who's just addicted to art. He's got over 10,000 works, ranging from classical African art to modern art to contemporary art, and has collected wide and deep. He has over 200 works of some artists. For certain artists, he's the largest collector of their work. That's really fascinating. They're moving to the next stage. He's collaborating with the university on a private museum which will have his collection, but also temporary exhibitions. One of the reasons that I am involved with the art fair is because I can see the way in which, in the absence of a biennale in Nigeria, it can actually strengthen the art infrastructure. Nigeria is a fairly wealthy country—we're an oil-producing nation, so you have very, very wealthy people who are busy buying yachts and private jets.

AK:

And now they want to buy art!

BS:

Yes. And we want them to buy art!

AK:

And then how does it evolve from a status thing to a real investment in the artists and community? It's interesting because so often we're in this anti-market position: we're against it, but it's also necessary. The contemporary art world needs the market to exist. And as much as we always say that we're in one of these non-profit spaces, it's all so enmeshed. Artists need people to support them. They need to pay their rent, they need to make their work. Cultural capital and actual capital are so intertwined.

BS:

You just have to do it. In the Nigerian context or an African context, there's very little government funding. That art that has existed has been thanks to the foreign cultural institutions, like the Goethe Institut, the Institut Français, the Italian Cultural Center, the British Council, and that's problematic on its own, because they're determining what art from Nigeria is. But they can't do that anymore, because now the local scene is strengthening, and they now have to respond to what we want to do, or they get left behind.

AK:

It sounds as though you are also cultivating the market there, in terms of collectors and educating people.

BS:

Yes, definitely. I think that's important, because we cannot move to the next stage by ourselves.

AK:

And you want investment from the local context, not just collectors in New York.

BS:

Yes, yes, yes, definitely. So, for example, this art fair that we're doing, I think all of the galleries will be based from within Africa. It's the first Lagos Art Fair, and the galleries are from South Africa, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Mali.

AK:

Will it have a program like other art fairs?

BS:

I'm working on the specially-curated programs. It's not a big fair. We're starting small, maybe 15–16 booths, different programs—there's a talks program as well. It's like a pilot edition. But we're really excited about it and next year it'll be bigger, and then we'll have people from wherever. The idea is not so much that it becomes a fair of African art, but a fair of contemporary art, and I hope that in three, four, five, six years, we can even have artists from anywhere in the world—China, India—and open up the possibilities for local collectors, who at the moment are collecting mainly Nigerian art. Ninety percent of what they collect is Nigerian. Most of these people are businessmen and women who work across the continent. You have a lot of people working in the oil industry who go to Angola, so if an Angolan artist is being shown in Lagos, then they're more likely to buy, because they can say, "Next time I'm in Angola, I'll do a studio visit." You also have a few Nigerians who are doing business in Ethiopia, and most of them go to South Africa already, and a lot of them do business in Ghana, Ivory Coast, in all these other places. The business links are there, but the cultural links are only just beginning, so that's really exciting as well.

AK:

In a sense, it's not just a process of de-centering, but a process of re-centering. This next question ties into some of the things you've said, and language has been so important to us. Why is the CCA a "centre", and when you were starting, how was "contemporary art" defined for you?

BS:

It's funny; the first project that I did in Lagos—the first time I started thinking about moving back, the name of what CCA is now was "Institute"—IVAC, Institute of Visual Art and Culture. And when I finally moved back and decided to open CCA in 2007, I jettisoned "Institute." Because it's not a research center in that traditional sense of it and I didn't want to confuse people by using the word "institute." Maybe it was just my thinking of "institute,"—you think of the sciences. It's interesting now, when you think about it, because it's about a laboratory, it's about experimentation. Maybe "Institute" may have worked, but a "Center" seemed more appropriate. In Nigeria, names and what we call things are very rigid. If I said to somebody, "I'm an institute in Nigeria," then they will automatically think along the more scientific research.

AK:

Or universities.

BS:

Right, that it's linked to a university, which I wasn't. I really wanted to articulate that sense of independence as well. And even with the name, "Center," they're like, "Oh, you're attached to a university." And I'm like, "No, no, I'm not. I'm really independent." Even "Center—"Center of Democracy"—has all these connotations, and if I was doing it today, I wouldn't call it "center" or "institute."

AK:

That was my next question!

BS:

It would probably be called "Àsìkò," or something like that, you know, one name: "Ars Flora." Like that.

AK:

Something less...

BS:

Institutionalized. Or institutionalizing. I would definitely change that.

AK:

If CCA, in whatever name it would have been, was being founded now, in 2016, what would you imagine it would be? Would it be these things that you're doing

now? Would it be the library and this pedagogical platform?

BS:

That's where I'm going, which is more research-oriented. There's a lot of activity being generated, and the problem is that a lot of the activity is being generated by non-art people—the billionaires' wives. They don't have art backgrounds; what they have is the money and the interest—they've been collectors as well. The scholars should actually be leaders because we have the most universities in the whole of Africa. We have the most art schools or art departments on the continent and we also have this horrible phenomenon where in order to get a promotion, the lecturers have to get a PhD, so we probably have the most PhDs, too.

AK:

So, artists have to get PhDs?

BS:

Yes, unfortunately.

AK:

Do they do that in the school system there?

BS:

Yes, most of them, ninety-nine percent.

AK:

Is it like a standard seven-year US PhD or is it more like the European system?

BS:

It's the three-year European, British model. We have a lot, too many. And they're doing nothing. It's just for promotion. You get your PhD and you just go back to what you were doing before—teaching and doing your own thing. Very few of them have gotten into writing. And they all live in this ivory tower. Very few of them are engaging with the wider artistic community, and there's so much going on in Nigeria that should be documented, but it's not being documented. I'm against the universities and all the academics there. I mean, some of them are my friends but fundamentally...

AK:

There is such a thing as over-professionalization.

BS:

It's just the lack of engagement on their part. It's really, really problematic. It means that, on top of the one million things that I do, I now have to do the research, do the writing, do the publication. And I think that's the biggest area, because you can imagine that over the last decade, a lot of activities have been happening. There's a lot of performance art that's going on in Nigeria, and the artists themselves are documenting it, but there isn't any critical discussion going on, there isn't any critical writing going on. In the moment, there isn't somebody sitting there saying, "I want to write about this, to think about it critically, because it was happening, and because I was there." Which is a big, big pity. It's the same with photography. What's the state of photographic practice in Nigeria today? All these issues, all these questions: the role and the rise of women, cultural entrepreneurs, and leaders, and artists. There are too many issues that need to really be engaged and documented. That's what I would be doing today if I were setting up CCA Lagos. I wouldn't necessarily be doing exhibitions, because I feel that there are enough people that have come in. Those who can afford it either take on curatorial consultants, or young curators that are graduating and interested in coming to Nigeria or to Africa to develop their skills, learn more about the contemporary art scene. So, there's enough of that, but there isn't yet enough publishing.

GW:

Coming from the context of Korea just now, we noticed that there were lots of artists working within Seoul who lived in Korea their whole lives and then they went off for their MFAs at institutions in the United States or Europe, whether it's the Royal College of Art, or SAIC, or Goldsmiths, and then returned to Korea. But looking through the artists that you've worked with, I didn't see any who went abroad to study. And I was curious, is that less of a phenomenon in Nigeria, or is it a matter of your curatorial focus?

BS:

I think that it's a little more complex. Sometimes those who do go abroad sometimes don't come back, because the infrastructure is not developed enough for them to come back. They almost outgrow the infrastructure available. I remember there was a young artist, all he did was to go for a six or nine month residency, and he started trying to move back to Nigeria from America. He was trying to get a job at the university, and he had a masters and they told him they won't employ him because he doesn't have a PhD, that anybody coming in now as an artist needed a PhD. The poor guy had to go back to the US even though he didn't have his papers and he has been struggling. I don't even know if he has it now—this is nearly ten years ago.

AK:

So, he fell out of the system he was in.

BS:

Exactly, more or less.

AK:

You either have to stay in the system and work up, or resign yourself to being outside.

BS:

Yes. Or even, you can't even get into the system. That's really sad because he would've been amazing going back into the educational system and helping a new generation of artists. And then you have others like Emeka Okereke, who does Invisible Borders, who went to school in France to study photography. I think he's done a BA and MA and is now registered for a PhD in Germany or Amsterdam or somewhere in Europe. But he's been coming back to do projects each year. They have this project called Invisible Borders where each year they travel by road across Africa. And he's done, I think, six editions of that as a young artist in his early thirties.

Then you have someone like Emeka Ogboh, the sound artist, and he had a DAAD residency and has sort of blown up. He's a sound artist, so he does, in a way, need to be outside of Nigeria, because access to the technology and the skills he needs are not available in Nigeria. He's remained in Germany. He was in the last edition of the Venice Biennale and now he's big, big, big, big. How do you balance coming back to a country where the infrastructures that you need to develop your work at the highest level are not available? It's very, very complex on lots of levels, because his work is about Lagos, a changing Lagos. He was documenting a city in transition through sound.

You can imagine if you're not there for two years, the changes in African cities are substantial. What's interesting is that all of a sudden, you become disconnected quicker than maybe ten years ago because you're dealing with technology, and that's changing over time. We're not moving as fast as the technology is changing in the West. He's using technology in the West, which becomes redundant when he comes to Nigeria. How do you bridge it? That's why, maybe, within the Nigerian context it's a little bit more complex, and Lagos is a complex city.

AK:

You've done all this amazing work, but there's obviously been extra roadblocks along the way. What are your greatest frustrations?

BS:

I think I've actually been lucky because I developed CCA and I have kept my international network. I've been able to pull on that, but I've also been able to bring all the different segments together: the Pan-African segment, but also the international segment. I've been able to work in the West, but also work the way I want in Nigeria through this network. My frustrations haven't been much. I've been lucky with my colleagues; they're young, dedicated, committed individuals and we operate almost like a family. If I weren't a curator, I guess I would be an artist. The way we work is so un-institutional. You don't have to be in at 9am. You're in when you're in; I'm in when I'm in. The only thing that I ask is that if we have a project and it's supposed to open on the 4th of May, it opens on the 4th of May. I also work with artists, and they do their own thing. I'm working with young curators and I'm really happy for them to do their own thing. Go out to explore, because whatever they learn, they bring back to CCA as well. It has an impact. If I'm just keeping them there, there's a limit to how much I can share, to my knowledge, and there's a limit to how much I can absorb. It's good for them to go out and say, "I saw this thing here. Can we try it?" or, "There's this person that must definitely come to CCA." I see myself as a facilitator. Those are the kinds of things that I can do. I can help make things happen.

AK:

It sounds like your lack of frustrations is because you have created your own system.

BS:

Yes, I think so. It's really very, very open. And that's why I can go away for three months and the place doesn't crumble. People always ask me, "How do you go away for so long?" I'm like, "My guys are good."

AK:

You have a good network of people on the ground who are devoted to it.

BS:

Yes, they are. I remember once there was water dripping from upstairs into the library and my friend said, "Oh, Bisi, they called me." This was another artist, who was just a friend, and she gets in her car, dashes over, and makes sure the place is protected. So, it's really great to have that kind of buy-in from people, because it's not just mine, it's theirs. It's everybody's space.

AK:

A related question is, who do you feel are your peers? Who is CCA in dialogue with—not just you independently, but this thing you've created?

BS:

In Nigeria?

AK:

Or internationally or historically.

BS:

I'm really interested in some of the institutions in South America, for example. We've had a long dialogue with Video Brazil and Solange Farkas, who set up that institution thirty years ago. I'm really interested in what she's doing, and she's interested in what I'm doing, and what others across the continent are doing. Another curator whose work I really like is José Roca in Colombia. He has this residency model which really focuses on nature. And that's a starting point for a lot of the projects that they do; they're not too big.

When I first started, I was really interested in the curator of Istanbul Modern, Vasif Kortun. He's one of the curators that has really galvanized the local art scene. It started small and has grown to what it is today, and I thought that was really close to my context, where you actually have to build.

And he was based in the States and felt he had to go back, so it's the sort of same trajectory.

I look at India quite a bit. Although they're not a residency, there's KHOJ in New Delhi, who are doing really interesting programs. If I transition, I would like to transition into something like the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong. What I want to do is have this archive, this research center, but also have programs that emanate from it. There's another one in Sri Lanka, which also changed the profile to be closer to what the Asia Art Archive does—that's the Sri Lanka Archive of Contemporary Art, Architecture & Design. The curator focuses her practice more on books, publications, so she does these long-term projects with artists around books. I'm really interested in that, so I look at what they're doing. And like me, but after me, she went to the Royal College as well—studied art history at Edinburgh, then the Royal College. In Europe, I look at organizations in the UK, which is what I know better. There's Iniva, there's Autograph, there's the South London Gallery, and Camden Arts Centre. These are medium-sized institutions. But funnily, our relationships have been actually bigger than us, so we've worked with the Menil Collection, and Tate Modern.

AK:

Which I think we can also identify with as ICA. We often work with institutions that are twice as big as us. We have no collection. It's accordion-like the way we scale up and down.

BS:

I always find that hilarious: Here I am, funding, nothing, and I'm working with the Tate. But it has its advantages as well. You get all the funding and you get to do the project you want to do.
