

Conversation with  
JESSICA KAIRÉ,  
Nuevo Museo de  
Arte Contemporáneo  
(NUMU)

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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JESSICA KAIRÉ,  
Nuevo Museo de Arte  
Contemporáneo (NuMu)

Jessica Kairé is the Co-Founder of Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (NuMu), a contemporary art museum in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

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**TAUSIF NOOR:**

Can you tell us about how you co-founded NuMu with Stefan Benchoam and what you were responding to?

**JESSICA KAIRÉ:**

Stefan and I grew up together in Guatemala, and we have very similar backgrounds. At some point, we became even closer friends through our mutual interest in becoming artists and working in a community of artists in Guatemala. In those first years, we quickly noticed that there was an overall lack of support for artists—institutional, governmental, private. We started to talk informally about what we could do about this from our perspectives as artists. We couldn't really afford a formal institution with a large space, and it also wasn't our initial aim. These were very casual conversations that we had for I'd say a few years.

At some point, we started thinking about creating a museum, conceptually. It turned into a two-fold interest—on the one hand, we were coming from a perspective of institutional critique, and on the other, we wanted to create something that was actually functional to fill that void and support artists and present projects. These conversations were happening around the same time that *Proyectos Ultravioleta* (UV) was founded in 2009. It was an artist-run space founded by four artists, and although I wasn't one of the founders, I was often a collaborator. It was also happening around the same time that other artist-run spaces were beginning to come about throughout Latin America. We basically wanted to create one more space that could offer this support, but from a more institutional, rather than artist-run, point of view.

The first idea was to create a digital platform, given the lack of physical space. We looked into it, but it didn't go anywhere, and after a while, we just dropped it. I moved to New York in 2012, and Stefan was still living in Guatemala. One day, he called me up and told me that he'd found a space for rent, which is our current building. It's an egg-shaped structure that we'd seen growing up in Guatemala City, and everyone gives us a different answer as to when it was actually built, but it was roughly around the 1980s. Stefan was actually looking for a space for UV, and this building wasn't really a good fit for it, but we couldn't give up the building. It was affordable, and it was the right space to start something small, so we signed the lease within a few days of finding it. Long story short, it was an accidental find, but we've been presenting exhibitions here since then.

The founding mission of NuMu is to present, support, and document contemporary art. I would say that the actual physical structure has shaped what NuMu is now. Since starting NuMu, I've realized that a physical structure was actually important, and that's my point of view given the context of Guatemala City, where there is a lack of physical institutions and places that you can actually walk in for free and find a good program and experience work from local and international artists. The physicality of it has turned into a very important element, even for passersby who may not necessarily be interested in looking at art. It still becomes an experience for them. We developed a program by looking really carefully at large and established institutions so it would conceptually fit into this circuit of museums, while also questioning them.

ALEX KLEIN:

You mentioned that you and Stefan are both artists, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on what differentiates NuMu as a "museum" from an "artist-run space."

JK:

I think it's blurry, and I think at the end of the day, the people creating the space make those rules. In this case, I would say that the way that the program is structured is largely responsible for making NuMu function as a museum, for instance by making sure we have a certain number of exhibitions per year paired with educational programming, along with the way we work with artists. I think our overall approach to programming is in line with museums, but I do think it's blurry because we're questioning those things, too. If we were to fully institutionalize, it would just be modeled after those museums.

AK:

In a sense, presenting a space that is small-scale and housed within a unique building, and then calling it a museum is a statement in and of itself.

JK:

That was a large part of it, and it took a long time for people to warm up to. I think internationally it was easier, but locally it took a while. Ultimately, we realized that a big part of people recognizing us as a museum was the consistency of the work being presented, even after 10 years, and the public relying on us to provide access to new projects and ideas.

AK:

Can you talk a little bit more about the local ecology of the arts scene in Guatemala? What other organizations might you be in dialogue with locally, and who are you looking to in a broader sense?

JK:

Locally Guatemala has a few museums, but there are no contemporary art museums—NuMu is the first and only one at this point. There's one modern art museum, which has been there for a long time, and it's housed in an amazing space that used to be a dance hall. It has a lot of issues because it's funded by the government, and that's one of the reasons we've never relied on or even applied for government funding. It's a very unstable museum, where one day you can go in and find an amazing show and the next day, you'll see art by the grandson of the president. I'm kind of joking, but this does happen. It's not a reliable institution, and their program isn't consistent.

We also have several cultural institutions, including ethnographic and archaeological museums, but not exactly ones that support nor respond to new artists, or artists who are developing their practices. In terms of other art spaces, there are a few galleries that have been around for a long time, like Sol del Rio, which has had played an important role since the 1980s and now functions as a commercial gallery and more recently, Proyectos Ultravioleta, which has been critical to turning the scene around locally and bringing outside attention to Guatemala.

The most interesting thing that started to happen around the time UV began shaking up the scene a few years ago is that things began to

decentralize. Initially, everything happened in Guatemala City, and artists from the countryside, including indigenous artists, would be coming in and participating in the scene. Nowadays, you'll see more of these galleries and artist-run spaces elsewhere, and people from the city and international curators and practitioners are traveling and visiting a broader network of artists.

It's my understanding that prior to the 1980s, when we had a political crisis, the scene was also very strong. After the 1980s, there was a kind of silence—not necessarily a pause in production, but fewer artists were daring to do things publicly. After the 1990s, that started up again, and I'd say that now we're at a good moment.

TN:

Where is NuMu located in Guatemala City? Is your building in a central location? How do people access NuMu?

JK:

Guatemala City is divided into different areas called "zones", and NuMu is located in Zone 10, a very high-traffic area located south from the city's center. NuMu is part of an open shopping mall. At rush hour, around 5pm, the streets that border the museum are packed with cars, so you have an audience of people who are seeing the building by just driving past it. Then, you have all the passersby on foot, walking to and from work. It's within a private property, but anybody can access it. We'll have our door closed if the exhibition has any fragile elements or objects, but if it doesn't, we sometimes leave the door open. But we always have a sign that says that visitors can approach NuMu's manager, Kristy, who lives across the street, to enter the space anytime between 9am to 5pm, Monday through Saturday. We're pretty accessible.

TN:

We've been thinking about accessibility in different ways, such as the language in which your didactic materials are written, for instance. Are your materials available in both English and Spanish, and how do you think about accessibility in a broad sense?

JK:

There are a few things I'll mention with regards to that. In terms of how the space is set up, our lights are on 24/7. If someone is walking by at 8pm and it's dark, they will be able to look at the interior and basically see the exhibition on their own. We always include a wall text outside of the space that people can read, which is somewhat reliant on art jargon, but then there's Kristy, who is a wonderful collaborator. She doesn't come from an arts background, but she is an arts enthusiast, and she's become an important ambassador for NuMu. She'll explain the exhibition to you in her own words and talk to you about it, which is a really different approach to have someone who isn't coming from the contemporary art field.

We also offer activities and programs, not for every single exhibition, but we'll often do guided visits to different collections and spaces. We had an exhibition with Lake Vereá, which is the artist duo Francisca Rivero-Lake Cortina and Carla Vereá Hernández, who are photographers from Mexico City. They presented a series of photographs documenting the legacy of the Guatemalan modern artist Carlos Mérida, whose abstract murals can be found throughout the city. While Lake Vereá were installing the show here, we organized a tour of Mérida's murals, and you could see people starting to engage more with the material, especially those who aren't part of the contemporary art circuit. I think these activities and the educational programming have been really effective, and I know it sounds very formal, but it's not. We've done different things—film screenings, artist talks, some participatory performances—that hopefully complement the material and warm people up to it, especially those who aren't used to looking at this stuff.

AK:

Can you tell us a little bit about how you decide on the exhibition programming, in terms of the kinds of artists you show? What does your schedule look like for a typical year?

JK:

The structure of the program has changed a little bit over the years, in terms of the number of shows we do. When we started in 2012, we aimed to do four exhibitions per year, each paired with an educational component, plus interdisciplinary projects presented throughout the year. We were able to do that for a few years, and then we slowed down a bit and were presenting three shows per year. Last year, we had a longer presentation, for a whole calendar year starting in January. So, it's been pretty organic in terms of how we present exhibitions and respond to the other responsibilities and think

about the time that Stefan and I have available to do the projects, given that it's mainly the two of us who are doing most of the work.

TN:

Is there a particular focus on a format of exhibition, such as solo projects, or two-person exhibitions, or is it more organic?

AK:

And to build on that, are you looking more to artists in your region, or is it a broad, responsive approach to contemporary art?

JK:

It has definitely been an organic approach to selecting artists, and our intentions are very broad. I think because our networks gravitate toward Latin American artists, we've presented more of them. But that doesn't mean we consider ourselves to be a "Latin American museum," or that we have a focus on Latin American artists; it just happened naturally. At this point, we're slowly starting to present artists from further abroad. In January, for instance, we'll be opening a show by the Beirut-based artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan.

In terms of how we go about deciding who to show, it's similar to how the museum developed, through conversations we've had with our peers. In the beginning, it was more about working with artists who are doing something interesting right now and thinking about a good contribution to the local scene could be, such as bringing international artists to create some type of exchange. Over time, it's been interesting because we've been focusing more and more on diversity. At some point, we started to count how many male artists we were presenting versus female artists, and there was an imbalance, so we started to work on that; at this point, it's around 50-50. That's been a big focus in the past 2-3 years, as well as a focus on diversity in background. Over the years, we've shown Guatemalan artists from various regions and ethnic backgrounds. Another focus has been to present a range of themes, fields and mediums, from architecture to sound art to painting and collage, for instance.

Something that's happened more organically is that along with presenting work that is site-specific and responsive to the local context is that we really like for our exhibitions to respond in some way, or have some connection, to the exhibition that preceded it at NuMu. If you were to look at our program for the last couple of years, you might see a sort of chain reaction, where whatever we are showing somehow kickstarts the next exhibition.



TN:

You mentioned not being a “Latin American institution,” and something we’ve been exploring is how different institutions define the “regional.” It’s a question that is more often asked of non-American and non-European artists and practitioners, and it can mean a range of things. What does “regional” mean to you at NuMu?

JK:

You’ve probably heard other Latin American artists say, “Oh I’m not a Latin American artist, I’m an artist from Latin America.” It seems like a small difference, but I think it places fewer limitations. In terms of Latin America, there are so many specificities within local communities, even between accents, but we do have a shared history of colonization. In Guatemala, the civil war that took place in the 1980s had its specific and particular issues, but it was in response to something bigger.

We don’t really get hung up on the idea that we need to respond to a notion of “Latin American” for the regional. I think it’s more about responding to very immediate contexts—around NuMu, around the city, the political history of the country, and whatever the artist is coming with and their own histories. It becomes a hybrid of both things.

TN:

Do you employ any other people at NuMu other than Kristy?

JK:

As of now, our staff consists of three people: Stefan and I as co-founders and co-directors, and Kristy, who basically manages the space and receives visitors. We’ve had collaborators on-and-off, but there aren’t any formal arrangements. It’s something that we always dream about, and it’s definitely something that’s been more challenging for us, but there’s always a bit of hesitation with wanting to grow so much because then we might turn into an actual institution, and that could complicate things. We’ve been discussing what might be the best balance.

AK:

Because you're in New York,  
is Stefan on the ground in  
Guatemala to install shows?

JK:

In general, when it comes to shows, we're both there. There's been a few instances where one of us is in Guatemala and the other can't be there, because Stefan also travels quite a bit for Proyectos Ultravioleta, but we are based in both places. Usually we'll coordinate the exhibition openings with our schedule and with the artist's schedule. Lawrence Abu Hamdan's show, for instance, is organized by the Guatemalan curator Pablo José Ramírez, who doesn't live in Guatemala, but will be there for that month. We try to make things easy and convenient and make things happen however possible.

AK:

And just for the record, how big  
is the space?

JK:

It's approximately 2 meters wide by 2.5 meters tall and shaped like an egg.

AK:

When institutions think about  
growth, it's often in terms of  
physical growth and expanding  
the building. How tied is the  
physical structure of your building  
to the identity of NuMu? It seems  
to be synonymous with what one  
thinks of as NuMu.

JK:

It's a very friendly building—when NuMu traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the building was one of the reasons we were able to smoothly, or almost smoothly, cross borders, because of the egg shape.

We have already expanded a few times within the neighborhood, and there are ways to expand physically. For the exhibition we did with the brothers Fernando and Angel Poyón, who are two local Guatemalan artists, we asked neighboring businesses and residences if they would host some of the works throughout the exhibition's run. This was a way to expand and engage the community at the same time. Sometimes we dream about taking over the whole shopping mall space, but then our offices would be bigger

than the museum itself. We're also thinking about doing projects that could happen outside of the city. Expanding is something we think about, but it's not necessarily a priority. We're a small space, but setting up a show still requires time and resources.

Our main way of expanding has been to build the replica of NuMu that traveled to Los Angeles, then to Santa Fe for the SITElines.2018 Biennial, and most recently has been wandering through the desert.

AK:

It's like a mirror version of NuMu.  
It's interesting to think of these other eggs in different spaces.

JK:

We said we'd cap it at a dozen.

AK:

Your architecture really is your organization in so many ways.  
You mentioned resources—how do you finance the organization?  
How do you deal with funding to support your projects?

JK:

Funding has fluctuated over the years, and it keeps fluctuating. The way that we started the museum is through the 2012 Guatemala Paiz Biennale. Stefan and I had both been invited to participate as artists and we presented individual projects, but we had found the space for NuMu around the same time. We asked the curators of the Biennale if we could do NuMu as a collective project instead. They agreed, but they said that we would only get one honorarium, so instead of \$1000, we would get \$500 in total. Instead of accepting that deal, we decided to go ahead and do our individual projects with a budget of \$100 each and kept the rest to start NuMu. We put \$800 to that first exhibition and first month's rent, so it really started off with a humble amount of funding.

Throughout the years, it's been a mix of our own funds, private donations, and a few public fundraisers for different projects. The fundraising has either been for NuMu's general operations or for specific projects, like the Kickstarter we did jointly with LACMA. We're working on making our funding more sustainable as NuMu becomes more formal and as we've expanded into the U.S. and gained more supporters and audiences.

AK:

Do you own your building?

JK:

We do not. Even if we proposed it, I don't know if the owners would be willing to sell.

AK:

Are you in danger of the rent going up too high, or the building being sold, or is it a stable situation?

JK:

Our situation is stable, despite the fact that there are a number of people who are interested in the property and are probably willing to pay a little more than we do for the space. But the owners have kept us here, and I'm not sure if they're happy with our stability or if it's the fact that we've enhanced the immediate surroundings. We noticed a few months after we opened that the gardens nearby were better taken care of, little things that suggest that they see the benefit of NuMu's existence.

AK:

We're also very interested in questions of audience and community, so as NuMu travels, have you found different audiences and responses, and has that changed the way you program? What has that experience been like for you?

JK:

Thinking back to the whole journey, the foot traffic at LACMA was, of course, super high compared to our location here in Guatemala City. Stefan often jokes that, in Guatemala, we're the most visited museum in the world, by square feet. On the one hand, it was really exciting to see the kind of engagement NuMu could have in a different locations. But along the road, we also encountered so many kinds of people that supported or were excited by our work.

In general, NuMu has had an easier reception outside of the country, but that doesn't take away from our audience in Guatemala. We understand that it's just different, and we've realized that the new replica traveling abroad can't function the same way as the one in Guatemala. It has to take its own

form and be responsive to wherever it is. I don't know if the new NuMu has necessarily changed our audience, but it's been critical to understanding how site-specific NuMu really is, which has in turn made us take a conscious approach to site-specificity.

TN:

You've had so many collaborators, including the organization Independent Curators International (ICI), LACMA, and a number of independent curators. How do you select who to collaborate with, whether institutions or individuals?

JK:

I would say that it's mainly been Stefan and I reaching out to people through our respective networks of artists and curators who we have friendships with. But it doesn't always happen like that; sometimes we'll connect with an artist who we admire and have gotten closer to, and it'll also be the right timing. There are other artists who we want to work with, but it may just not be the right moment. There have also been instances that are really organic. For instance, when we were in Los Angeles for the LACMA project, we were hanging out at the museum's cafe and we saw the artist David Lamelas stepping into the NuMu installation. Stefan quickly walked over and spoke with him a little bit, and then we went to one of his openings that same week. We told him how much we loved his work and asked if he'd be willing to do a project with us at NuMu and he accepted, so we ended up doing a two-person exhibition with David and Hildegard Duane, a video exhibition. That was kind of coincidental, but we do have a roster of artists that are like dream shows that we'd like to present, and sometimes that works out and sometimes it doesn't.

The last area that I'll mention that we consider when selecting projects is artist legacies. We're very intentionally pursuing projects that will document and support and hopefully contribute to giving more recognition and permanence to an artist's legacy. For example, the Guatemalan artist Margarita Azurdia, who passed away in the 1990s, is one of our ultimate favorite artists, and she has not been widely recognized. We did a show, *Geometrías y Sensaciones*, that was an homage to her in 2016. That same year we did an exhibition of work by Joaquín Orellana, who has been working with sound for the last fifty years and is one of the most famous avant-garde musicians from Latin America.

AK:

Returning to that question of audience and community, can you talk a little bit more about the communities and viewership you have in Guatemala? Is your audience the same thing as your community?

JK:

There are different groups. There are passersby, who we hope come back to the opening, though there's no one way to ensure that. But we have people who come up to us and say, "Oh I love your project, I pass by it every day," and they will actually show up to an opening and become a consistent visitor. Our neighbors are give or take; some of them engage and some don't. Then, we have the more "typical" group, the art community, which is still very small. What we try to do now is collaborate with a few spaces, and they've have openings for, say, three different spaces on the same day, but at different times, so that there are visitors, but you don't end up fighting about trying to get them to your space at the same time over the others.

AK:

I'm curious about this juncture you're in, now that you've been around for seven years. How do you treat the idea of the "institution"? Do you think of yourselves as an institution at this point, or do you still think there's a critical distance between your work and the institution?

JK:

I think there's still a little bit of resistance from certain institutions, but overall, I think we've become an established space where people do expect us to continue presenting work and to be an active part of the arts community. Even in times where we've had challenges with funding and other things, we've really felt that we've had to push through and keep the space running because in a way, the scene depends on it. Not that we're benefiting so many people, but it definitely contributes to a certain kind of stability—where there is a museum that is actually bringing in artists from all over the world as well as supporting local artists and curators and treats them as a museum should. I think that the consistency and stability of it has definitely turned it into that

kind of institution, which is interesting because a large part of why NuMu was created was to question why and what a museum should be like in the 20th century. If some people have come to see NuMu as a museum, then it's a great start in redefining that term.

AK:

Going forward, what are some of your wishes for the institution, and how do you see the next few years unfolding? What are you most excited about?

JK:

On the one hand, we're definitely aiming for a little bit of a slower pace, with really well-developed projects that might each last a little bit longer. That's something that's in the process of being restructured. Curatorially, not much has changed—we still have a list of people who we want to work with and some of them we've had on this list for several years, so we're hoping to get to more of them. In terms of the stability for the educational programming, I'm hoping that we can engage in more of an oral history project locally. It goes back to preserving the legacies of these artists who have passed away and finding a way to document their practices and create a better archive. In Guatemala, that's one of the issues: Things do happen, but there's very little documentation of them. That would be one of my wishes for the future, as well as to just become a more sustainable space.

AK:

And maybe that's part of the "museum" aspect of what you're gesturing to in your name. When you archive the projects that you've done, does it live on the website?

JK:

Our website could be improved, but we do also keep our own archives. Most of our texts are in English and Spanish. The archive has the texts from the exhibition and all of our ephemera, which is more or less our collection: objects, artworks, and things left behind by the artists after the show closes. It's a mix of an archive and a collection, so to speak. It's stored in our closets in our houses.

AK:

And I'm assuming the English-language texts are so that you can reach a larger audience outside of the specificity of Guatemala?

JK:

Yes. It's also something that's been done as a result of social media. Most people can't actually visit the show, but they can at least read about it and learn more about NuMu from a distance. Now that we're in the States with our traveling museum, I think it also needs to be done in the reverse in a way.

AK:

Because it's really just two of you conceptualizing the program, I'm wondering if NuMu could exist without you. Is there a plan for it going forward if the two of you need to step away?

JK:

You know, as we were exchanging emails, I looked up the definition of "institute" just to get a reminder, and one of the definitions read something like "the space will continue working after the founders are gone." For example, with Beta Local in Puerto Rico, it's built into the structure: Someone can remain as director for a number of years, but after that, the position shifts onto the next generation, and it keeps rotating indefinitely. And that's one of the spaces we looked at when we founded NuMu—just the way they worked, and it was founded around the same time, I think, in 2009.

Stefan and I have talked about the succession plan, and it's not resolved yet—but it's not off the table. If it were the right people, it could bring a fresh perspective to the space. It's not strictly attached to our personal views or tastes or interests, so who knows?

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