

Conversation with
EMILY PETHICK,
The Showroom

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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Emily Pethick was the Director of The Showroom, an exhibition space in London, from 2008–2018.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

We are really curious to hear how our colleagues in the field are thinking about the language that they work with and the context that they're invested in. Can you talk about the mission of The Showroom?

EMILY PETHICK

I took over The Showroom ten years ago now. At that time, The Showroom had quite a strong history of producing artist's work mainly through solo exhibitions and has been a kind of space that has been quite important in terms of enabling artists to do their first kind of ambitious solo exhibitions in a public space. So, it has a mission which is very much centered around emerging artists and how an organization like The Showroom can be a catalyst in an artist's career. When I first started, I wanted to broaden that a bit and make it less centered on a career focus, and to think also about what kind of practices and values an organization like that has and to also think about what kind of social function it has.

The Showroom at the time needed to move because the building it was in before was very rundown and limiting its progress and growth, and it was in quite a vulnerable position. We were offered a building in an area called Church Street which is sort of northwest of the center of London. Before, it had been in the East End, which is an area which has a big population of artists and galleries. We took it out of that context and into an area that has the Lisson Gallery actually, but other than that, it's not an area that's known for artists and culture. It's also an area that's in the top 10 percent of the most deprived wards in the UK, but in a borough in Westminster which has some of the most and least deprived wards in the country. There's a lot of tensions in Westminster because of that. It's probably the richest area of the country next to some of the poorest, to put it bluntly.

AK

Did you initiate the move or was that started before you?

EP

When I was appointed to The Showroom, the board had already decided that we had to leave that building. It was interesting that the property in the East End had really become much more expensive than when The Showroom started out. The Showroom was one of the first independent spaces in the East End. And then there were many more galleries, and it was nestled within a kind of art landscape. Prior to this I was living in the Netherlands for a few years, and upon moving back I entered into London with fresh eyes and was already thinking about where would it make sense to move to, to take it out of that comfort zone, and to give a kind of new mandate to it.

AK

This is around 2008/2009?

EP

So, I started in 2008. This was around the time when there was first of all the financial crisis and a change of government to conservative the following year, and so there were a lot of quite big shifts in the political and social landscape. So, it was a moment where we really had to quite quickly reassess what The Showroom was and how it could be run. The opportunity of this building came up through talking to Nicholas Logsdail of Lisson Gallery, actually. I had curated a show there in 2007.

AK

What was the building previously?

EP

The building originally was part of an airplane parts factory in the 1920s, I think. When we took it on, it was being leased by Terry Farrell from the architecture practice, Farrells. He's one of the top British architects, and his practice is around the corner. He's very invested in the area. He developed the building, which was this former airplane parts factory, and the building behind it, and he lives in it. At that time, there was a local forum that was being led by a regeneration of units and neighborhood management projects. They were trying to stimulate change in the area through trying to get local stakeholders. So, it came out of this neighborhood forum that Nicholas attended and mentioned The Showroom. I was sort of thinking about the area, and I bumped into Nicholas. We took a walk around and then it sort of went from

there.

AK

Often we think of art institutions landing in poor neighborhoods and becoming a bellwether for gentrification. How did you deal with that?

EP

Well, when we first moved there people were asking me how are you going to take responsibility for becoming part of this way in which culture gentrifies, but I thought actually Terry Farrell was quite clever. They were thinking about The Showroom more in terms of bringing diversity into the neighborhood. Without expectation. It's a neighborhood that has an interesting history.

There are a lot of things that have been there a long time and actually this is all starting to develop, and I realized how kind of insignificant The Showroom is in relation to all that kind of stuff because it's mainly housing and land. There is a lot of low-rise housing that they're slowly starting to knock down to densify the area, and so in a way, it was one of the areas that has really been left untouched, outside of gentrification. But now it's really been seized upon by property developers because it's very central in London and hasn't been developed. In a way, there has been this period where all of that stuff has started to happen, and quite a big shift has been taking place in terms of the way in which the conservative government has tried to shrink the welfare state and remove a lot of state support for people who are from more deprived social parts of society. A lot of families have been moved out of the areas like this with benefit caps and all sorts of shifts. It took us about a year to negotiate the lease, and in that year, we just started to get to know people and develop.

AK

What was that transition like?

EP

It was funny because we didn't have a lease secured yet. We had already moved all of The Showroom's non-precious storage over to a storage area in the neighborhood, and we started to do a lot of meeting with locals and the stakeholders, building the network. So then, we had quite a smooth transition into the area because we had actually done a lot of groundwork in that time, and we were kind of waiting. It felt at the time a bit kind of speculative. We didn't know whether we were going to get the lease, but it was actually good because it gave us a base to start from. Then we applied for a fund for a staff member to be dedicated to the neighborhood, and we got one-year funding

for a pilot program called Communal Knowledge. Then we started that, and we got funding to continue it beyond the first year. Now, eight years later, we don't have funding beyond October, so the new director is going to have to decide where to go with that aspect of the program.

I worked in other areas in London where there hasn't been receptiveness, but here it was interesting that there is an openness from lots of people and organizations to collaborate and to get involved in quite experimental projects. We often put out open calls on the neighborhood's notice boards for people to be involved in projects and we get people coming forward. And so that's been the way in which we developed it. We're often letting people use the space and host neighborhood lunches. In the neighborhood, there was a local community engagement officer, who has retired now, who was known as the "walker-talker" of Church Street. He had an important and bonding role in the neighborhood. He's sort of like the glue, at one point he was made redundant from his position also through all these kind of changes within the social sector, and another housing organization took him on to continue the same role, which showed how much he was valued .

It's been interesting because we really felt a lot of transition in relation to wider forces in terms of social, political, economical situations, and that kind of underpins a lot of things that we've done in the program. When artists visit, they have often been really interested in the local context.

The Communal Knowledge program has been led by Louise Shelley since 2010 and specifically addresses the neighborhood. The other areas of the program we sometimes find a way in which we integrate some kind of local engagement, but it's never a prerequisite. I think it felt like something that's forced. We are quite careful with the people and practices that we introduced, and we also are careful with the relationships. It's always been mediated by Louise.

AK

That's good – so you have a consistent voice.

EP

Yes, we developed long-term relationships. There are a lot of institutions where they have outreach programs and it's a lot about getting a bunch of kids in and ticking a box, but it's not about actually getting to know people. Actually, Louise is leaving soon as well, she will be the next curator at Cubitt, so it's a bit of an end to an era.

AK

Right, so it will be a whole new Showroom in a way.

EP

Yes! However, I know that the forthcoming director, Elvira Dyangani Ose, is really interested in developing the approach to community further.

AK

That seems very distinctive about what you're saying about having a member of staff getting to know people on the ground, getting the lay of the land and then continuing that dialogue. I know there are different things that you do at The Showroom, but what are the core components of the institution?

EP

I guess it's all in the program, we have an exhibition program with four exhibitions a year, usually. Then there's Communal Knowledge which is the local program, and then we have a lot of talks and events. Quite often we're hosting things. The Showroom doesn't actually have a program budget, so we don't have a budget to program events.

AK

Do you have to fundraise the individual events?

EP

We fundraise everything, every project, and everything that comes into the program.

AK

Does every program involve commissions?

EP

The exhibitions are always commissioned.

AK

Was that always the case?

EP

Yes, that's always been the case. That's really The Showroom's mandate.

That's what it's funded for by Arts Council England, which funds about 30 to 40 percent. Effectively each project kind of pays for itself in terms of when we start a commission. We're always having to think about how we're going to fund something. We don't ever have a starting budget, so that's why we tend to work quite slowly on long-term projects so that we can develop the work and figure out how it's going to be produced. The projects tend to have quite a lot of partnerships around them, and we have to go to multiple sources.

Sometimes they're crossing between different parts of the program. When I arrived at The Showroom – I had just come from Casco in Utrecht. I immediately forged a partnership and went for an EU grant which we got with Objectiv Exhibitions and Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen. We had that program and that was called Circular Facts and then we had another EU grant with the network cluster which Maria Lind initiated from Tensta Konsthall, and so I guess networking our work within a wider circuit of small institutions that work in kind of like-minded ways.

That's quite an important kind of initial step, and in a way, I'd like to think the foundations of the program from when I took over were really about both being very locally invested and globally connected. So, in a way, our energies were really concentrated on developing a local network and developing an international network. We also started being a part of a network called Common Practice, which advocated for small-scale producers and the kind of value that's produced through them. When I took over The Showroom, it was around the same time that Polly Staple took over Chisenhale. It was a group of peers who felt a bit isolated and frustrated with the way in which funding was being measured in relation to always looking at audience figures and measurements that were really stuck in a system of metrics, rather than looking at where something goes within its lifespan. We published this report called Size Matters, which was looking at how you have to look in a much wider, expanded way at how the work that we were doing plays out in the long term.

I think in terms of what was established over these last ten years was a lot about articulating what these organizations do in order to really argue for this part of the sector. These small organizations that have to still compete with the larger institutions, if you know what I mean, and how we work from the periphery not just in a kind of geographical sense of being off-center, but more experimental approaches that aren't the sort of dominant modes of the art world, and how you have to fight for that to survive.

AK

Finding like-minded peers and thinking about different timelines and scales, systems. I'm just curious to go back to when you were talking about working with

artists on projects with longer timeframes. How far out do you plan? How far do you work with an artist in advance?

EP

So, it depends. There have been some projects that have had three-year leads, for some it's a year, so between one and three years, I would say. The ones that we developed over time have enabled a lot more depth and reach for the work. Things like Uriel Orlow's project Theatricum Botanicum, which we were talking for a long time before we decided on that project and then it took time to develop a network around it, and it's still going on traveling around. It's a really big body of work where The Showroom supported the first stage in that, getting it off the ground. The film productions, where it's about finding the partners and then film is produced collectively and it travels around.

AK

There's flexibility in that perspective.

EP

Quite often we've ended up moving a project because it's not ready. So, the program has always been a bit of a juggling act.

AK

I'm sorry that we missed our opportunity; that was always in the back of my mind. Well, in the future!

EP

Yes, there will be other opportunities!

AK

How are invitations extended to artists? Do they grow out of relationships?

EP

Yes, quite often I'd be in conversation with someone for a while before committing to produce work. I think it takes time to figure out the right time or the right project and to get to know someone. I think those projects have

been more rewarding on both sides. But sometimes you've got a hole in the program, and you do something much quicker, and those are also good. So, sometimes it's good to have a faster momentum and to not have a project going on for years.

AK

Are there ever curators on the spot who can move through the selections or is it an internal conversation?

EP

It's always been under my leadership, but for example, the Communal Knowledge program was something that I established we hired a program coordinator, but then Louise Shelley took over that role in late 2010 and increasingly started to develop it with another project where she had very strong relationships with different groups, for example, the domestic workers' union, The Voice of Domestic Workers. She's been very involved in that. That kind of came out of a project that we brought from Casco called The Grand Domestic Revolution, but Louise really invested in that relationship and got very involved in it. There are a lot of projects with young people that she's developed. I think she's going to be really missed, actually, in the neighborhood because she's going to be finishing up soon. But anyway, that program evolved through dialogue between Louise and I, but there are definite aspects which Louise really initiated herself and developed without much input from me.

AK

How many people work at The Showroom total?

EP

So, it's five on staff, but nobody is actually full-time. A few of us have kids. Three of us young children, so that's been a part of how we work and juggle around.

AK

I'm assuming that this is all part of your leadership too. So often the discussion is that women have to choose between their careers and their families, and it sounds like you're making an environment that this could be

sustainable.

EP

It's very much a team effort, also in terms of how decisions are made, which is not in a very authoritarian, top-down way. A lot of things are discussed amongst the staff. There was a certain point when we decided to write down our values. Periodically it's been important to step back and look at what we are as an organization and try to find ways to articulate it. We did a lot of mapping our projects to look at what's come out of them. I think a lot of the work we do is centered around relationships and those, of course, produce other things, so we started to look at the work and where it goes and what comes out of it and what are the kind of byproducts.

AK

I think that has been so important to so many of the people that we have been talking to throughout this project. I actually just got back from Lisbon, where I've been working with the Kunsthalle Lissabon. For them, it's all about that kind of relationship and thinking about the exhibition is always one point of publicness in that relationship.

EP

I think the exhibition is often a mid-point because the project is going elsewhere and they have very different kinds of legacies. It might be that we get to know somebody through a project, and then we continue on that relationship that leads somewhere else. For Uriel Orlow's project, they planted a medicinal garden in the neighboring care home which was produced as an open call for local people with plant knowledge. That group continued on working with a gardener, and it's become its own thing. I think it's important not to try and sort of contain things or keep them in the same place. You have to let things evolve in a kind of organic way around the program to see where that takes you.

AK

It sounds like you have a direction that allows that kind of elasticity which is not always the case. What is the genesis of the name, The Showroom?

EP

That comes from the old space, actually, which was a showroom.

AK

Oh, so it's inherited.

EP

I can't remember what it was. It was part of a factory.

AK

How do you think about it now?

If you could change the name
would you?

EP

No, I don't think I would've called it The Showroom. In a funny way, it is about making things physical, of what you show, because you're showing parts of a kind of process, in a way. And you're opening that up to the public, so there is this element of exhibition. In a way, the exhibition as a form is something that we really explored throughout: what an exhibition can be, what it can do, or what you can do within an exhibition.

For example, we had the exhibition in the autumn curated by WHW and Kathrin Rhomberg of the Kontakt Art Collection where we had a lot of different new commissions, and we really did the exhibition in a very experimental way where it really kind of like took over the space, the whole building, in fact. With Uriel Orlow, again, we had his work that he produced, but he also invited other artists who are working on the same areas. So it wasn't just a solo show. It had a kind of curatorial dimension. It has been quite a lot about experimenting with exhibition-making.

AK

Is there ever a porosity to the
exhibitions in which they bleed
outside of the building?

EP

We've actually started to use the outside a lot more.

AK

One of the things I have been
interested in with The Showroom
is the idea of giving yourself over
to another institutional model

and that's something we've been thinking a lot about in this project. Can you talk about this idea of institutional exchange, specifically with Chimurenga Library? What would it mean for you to step back and let another structure take over your way of doing things?

EP

Chimurenga was also a kind of inhabitation, and we're working actually now with Clark House Initiative, who are installing an exhibition that also is very dense. And for the Grand Domestic Revolution, we kind of brought over this huge project from Casco and had a very dense exhibition, but we used that as a base to integrate projects of ours that somehow spoke to the kinds of concerns of that project. It was a good way of contextualizing things that we were working on by using the context that they built. It was another instance of complicating authorship – like this is really a Casco project but then we kind of fluidly inserted things that we wanted to develop, and then it went to Derry. It was very fluid in the way way of hosting where you kind of have a built-in exchange.

TAUSIF NOOR

Just thinking about the selection of people that you choose to work with, there is this sense that organizations or artists will have a degree of autonomy within this.

EP

That's true. I think it's about recognizing organizational practices, in a way. As I see it, Clark House work in a very informal way, but they work in a way that's very invested in a certain politics. For example, at the moment they are focusing on the caste structure. They also use the resources of the city in a fantastic way. They extend their work out into the city.

Sumesh, who was one of the co-founders, was talking to a group of students at The Showroom the other day, and told them about how Clark House doesn't have a lock on the door, people just turn up and join in. It's a very open platform. I was really struck by the way in which they support artists early in their careers. They work with artists over long periods and work very collaboratively and collectively, supporting each other's work. They have an ongoing dialogue and are addressing some core questions collectively. To travel out is important to them as it's a way of not getting locked into certain positions in society, it seems to allow them to circumnavigate these social structures.

Another project that we brought to The Showroom was the epilogue of a series of exhibitions that WHW and Kathrin Rhomberg had been realizing in Zagreb, in collaboration with the Kontakt Collection (which is an important collection of Eastern European avant-garde artworks). In Zagreb, they exhibited these in a series of smaller spaces, such as in the Gallery Nova and an apartment they rented, in artists' studios, and small independent spaces. It was offering a kind of expanded platform that produced another site that isn't the museum or a place in which you would expect to see all of these works. It gave them a different kind of contextualization and energy. They introduced a lot of contemporary work into these exhibitions, which enabled you to access the work in different ways through the unhabitual relationships that were made. At The Showroom we made a number of new commissions. Overall the project worked in quite an experimental way with the collection. They really challenged, I think, a sort of certain view of Eastern European history and how it's presented. You know, trying to counter those conventions.

AK

Right, stepping away from a colonial view.

EP

Yes, it's worked with it in a different way.

AK

Do you see yourself as a contemporary arts organization? Would you say that it's accurate because you do so many things?

EP

Well, it was quite a rare kind of thing that we would work with more historical work.

AK

It would be okay too if you were like, "No we're not a contemporary art organization." But you would say you are generally?

EP

Yes, I think that's the base. I was at art school in the late 1990s, and it was very much orientated around studio practice and there was this question

always of, Is it art? I think that question has really been removed, you don't even need to ask that question. And you also don't need to see the gallery as a place that validates something as art. You can actually introduce so many different kinds of practice. I think one of the things that Kodwo Eshun always talked about in terms of the things that we did at The Showroom is to work with theorists. We co-commissioned with the Otolith Group and worked with Mark Fisher and Justin Barton, and we've also collaborated with Denise Ferreira da Silva and with Avery Gordon, with Eyal Weizman. This kind of work forged another program strand, and I think we've made a kind of home in London for practices that don't fit into the art world in a straight way. They're operating on the margins or are cross-disciplinary, but allow a space for exploring how you can practice theories in a more experimental way.

AK

Do you think of yourself as an institution?

EP

Well, I always steered away from that tone, actually. I always thought organizations have tried to stick to that, although you kind of do get caught up in the language of an institution. I think I prefer "organization" because it's closer to organizing or organisms because "institution" always feels like it's sort of hierarchical. We had quite a lot of discussion about that when we were working with Ricardo Basbaum. We started talking about the institution versus organization, and he had a good way of thinking about an organization in relation to organism.

AK

Who do you see as your audience? Is it that global audience you were talking about earlier?

EP

There is a core audience who I think are people who are engaged in art discourse, or critical theory, politics – which is local – London-wide, but also international. But then there's also audiences that we build in other ways like through the local work that we're doing. It's quite a young audience in a way. A lot of younger artists or people studying discourses that are related to art in different ways.

AK

You're coming up on the end of

your tenure at The Showroom, and I'm curious – obviously there's so much to be proud of, but what have some of your biggest frustrations been along the way?

EP

I think the economy. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm stepping away actually, apart from the attraction of a really exciting new position. It's really tough to keep it going. That cycle of always having to find money is exhausting. We are very strategic in the fact that we have managed to keep it going all this time, but there are always very complex back-ends to projects. The Showroom programs in a way that's challenging and with often difficult work. It's kind of work that needs time as it's not fitting in the market.

It's more difficult to fund The Showroom in the way that most of the dominant institutions in London are funded. We have a small supportive group of supporters and they're amazing. They are the ones that really recognize they're sharing this special kind of quality that we manage to get and work in. The thing is, it's not flashy. You have to get to know it to understand the value of it.

AK

I guess in total, it will be ten years for you at The Showroom?

EP

Yes, it feels good to leave around the ten-year mark.

AK

Do you have your successor lined up already?

EP

They're in the final stages.

AK

We've been talking to a lot of people who have founded their own institutions or made the institutions really their own. How much do you think the institution is dependent on you, and how

much do you see yourself in it?
Or is it dependent on you?

EP

I think it's quite exciting to have a new person to come in, and I think that will reinvigorate it actually, so I think it's not dependent on me, and I think it is somewhere that should be open to a new vision. I'm not wanting to protect what The Showroom has been under my leadership it's open to being reinvented.

One of the reasons why I also thought it time to go is so that it doesn't become over-identified with me and that it can become something else. I don't think it should stay the same, and I think it's really important that that opportunity is there for someone else. There's a bit of a staticness, I'm sure it's the same in the States that people sit in their jobs for years on end, and then it blocks the system for anyone else to come through.

AK

Yes, exactly.

EP

I don't believe in that hopping around. Before I knew that I was sorting heading off to the Netherlands, you would think, Oh, you're still at The Showroom.

AK

I think that institutional history is good, and organizational history is important. There are some projects that need that kind of time and development.

EP

I think that it's only recently that I've felt like I was at the point where I could move on without feeling like I was going to be missing out on something. There are a couple of shows coming up which I'll still be involved in. Then, there's nothing programmed beyond the next year. But it's a good moment for me because although we embarked on a few big vision things, which we're still kind of waiting on, someone else can shape those. I also want to leave at a high point.

AK

That makes a lot of sense.

EP

It is a really demanding job, and I sort of need other problems rather than the same old problems.

AK

You're going to a different organizational model, and I'd love for you to share a little bit about where you see yourself going in the Rijksakademie, and I guess this different pedagogical context of a residency.

EP

I did some research work in a team for the Stedelijk Museum, last year as they wanted to set up a new smaller satellite institution. I spent quite a lot of time speaking to people and researching the landscape. In that way, it felt interesting to take on an institution – this one I would call an institution – and it is in an interesting position in Amsterdam, but also in the international landscape. At the moment, there's a very particular idea about leaving artists in peace and giving them protective space, and I think that's important, but at the same time, you can also work on the ecology of the organization and the discourses that might connect people. You can work on connecting it more to its local context, and a network more internationally. I would say the sort of approach will be similar to the one at The Showroom in the kind of overarching way of thinking about how you can be locally kind of rooted and globally connected.

But of course, the Rijksakademie is a very different kind of organization. It doesn't have an exhibition space, but it could potentially in the future. It also doesn't have a regular public program, which I think is something really important in terms of how you share the knowledge and the resources. I'd be interested to see how something like the Communal Knowledge program might work in that kind of institution. And it has amazing resources, very experienced technicians. There are workshops. There's a library. There's a lot of space.

AK

Right. It sounds like a very exciting next step and a very logical one.

EP

Yes, I'm looking forward to working somewhere that has resources and space.

AK

Amazing. Well, it sounds like we're going to have to do a followup interview with you once you're settled.

EP

Also I think it's really interesting in terms of what it can do for artists and artists from parts of the world where there isn't strong infrastructure or support, and I think it has a very powerful role to play. Not powerful in the sense of politically powerful, but that it can really be transformative in lots of ways as an institution, as it has been in the past. But how you use that position is interesting to me, and that, of course, will evolve over time.
