

Conversation with  
NIKITA YINGQIAN  
CAI, Times Museum

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I is for

Institute

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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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NIKITA YINGQIAN CAI,  
Times Museum

Nikita Yingqian Cai is the Chief Curator of the Times Museum in Guangzhou, China.

With Alex Klein, Tausif Noor and.

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NIKITA YINGQIAN CAI:

I have been working at the Times Museum since 2010, which was a few months after I returned from De Appel's curatorial program. Since the opening of Times Art Center Berlin in November 2018, I also contribute to their curatorial programs for the purpose of bridging the two institutions. Times museum has adopted a kunsthalle model, which means we don't have a collection. It was set up as a branch of the state-funded Guangdong Museum of Art in 2003.

The architecture of the Times Museum is a conceptual idea originally proposed by Rem Koolhaas and OMA in the second Guangzhou Triennial in 2005. Koolhaas had planned an exhibition venue on top of an 18-floor residential building. The Triennial was co-curated by Hou Hanrou and Hans Ulrich Obrist, and they also imagined the museum to be a hub for artistic experiments in the Pearl River Delta.

During the pandemic, we restructured our previous programs and rewrote the texts and statements for our website, which was newly launched about two months ago. The archives of our previous exhibitions and programs are more or less the same, but we edited the mission of the museum: "We celebrate the social values of culture and embrace our communities at home and abroad. We attempt to indigenize the language of contemporary art, while also supporting artists to present their critical ideas and to produce ambitious works. By creating a network of thinkers, artists, and initiatives across regions and cultures, we are making Guangzhou and the Museum a great place for art goers and cultural producers."

One of our main challenges is the renaming of the Pearl River Delta, which was replaced by the term "Greater Bay Area" after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. The Pearl River Delta was adopted as a geographical definition by a top-down socioeconomic policy that was part of the Open Market Transformation, legitimized by Deng Xiaoping's Southern China Tour in the 1990s. What we think about is, what does the Pearl River Delta's renaming mean for us? How do we redefine our mission in response

to the shifting cultural landscape and the geopolitical identification of the region? The history of Canton and the Pearl River Delta is fascinating and disorienting. It was a treaty port in the 18th and 19th centuries before the Opium Wars and the establishment of modern China. After the 1980s it became a key manufacturing center of the global supply chain.

ALEX KLEIN:

Is Shenzhen part of the Pearl River Delta?

NYC:

Yes, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Macau, and Hong Kong, are all part of the Pearl River Delta. The historical proximity of the Pearl River Delta to what is called the South China Sea, or Nanhai, afforded a maritime route for exiles, Chinese traders, and laborers, dating back to the era of imperial China. Many of the indentured laborers, known as coolies, who ended up working in the Caribbean in the 19th and 20th centuries were originally from the Southern China provinces, like Guangdong and Fujian.

This rich history of exchange in material, culture, and labor between the Pearl River Delta and the Global Souths connects the Pearl River Delta with the diasporic trajectories in Southeast Asia, Africa, and some of the former Spanish colonies such as the Philippines, Mexico, and Cuba, as well as in the British Caribbean. In the past few years we have been working with artists, researchers, and curators to investigate the status quo as a reflection of the historical complexities and our role as an institution in the Pearl River Delta.

AK:

Was this also the impetus for your journal that you launched at the museum, *South of the South*?

NYC:

Yes, we launched the first issue of the digital journal with our new website.

AK:

You were saying the new website just launched a couple of months ago. Was this something that you had planned prior to the pandemic? Your brand-new digital presence coincided perfectly with the shutdown of the physical museum space.

NYC:

We started to work on the new website last year. When we were working from home in February, we could all help to upload the content quickly. Of course, everybody was in different places at that time—our colleague was stuck in New York, our designer is based in Berlin and our team members were staying in their hometown cities.

TAUSIF NOOR:

When you were discussing the complex history of the Pearl River Delta, with all of its various connections across time and place, it brought into relief some questions about networks that we've been thinking about in this project. In light of the pandemic, how have you been thinking about the strength of these networks between institutions in the art world from your specific location? Do you feel connected to all these other institutions abroad, or do you feel that you have to build stronger relationships, exchanges, partnerships, with institutions, with artists abroad or outside of the region, even as more things go online?

NYC:

I think online communication or digital forms of exchange cannot completely replace visceral and physical experiences. Every year we commission a lot of new works, even though most artists who visit can only stay for a limited period of time. Guangzhou is not a cultural center in China and many people in the art community might not visit the city without this kind of an invitation, but hosting people from different places and with different cultural backgrounds is also a valuable experience for our team.

The physical space of the Times Museum is quite unique, and it can be challenging to work with. It's always refreshing to witness how artists intervene with the space. I'm not sure Zoom will make us feel more connected to each other, even though we have to think of more environmentally friendly ways to produce works and exhibitions. We experiment with artists, who are

outsiders that might challenge the perceptions of our audience. We don't want to present our history and contemporary agenda as it is static and dead.

TN:

In light of this, given that we know that the writing of art history has itself been very Western-dominated, what's important to consider about the rise of new arts institutions in places such as China is that you're now able to set the agenda and define what your expectations are, which artists you'll show and how you build the program. Given your leadership role at the Times Museum, do you think there's now a chance to restructure these narratives through institutions in a way that's outside the forces of the market?

NYC:

I've been working in the same museum for ten years exactly and the institutional ecology here is not diverse at all. I share more ideas in common with peers outside of China than with institutional practitioners within China. Times Museum is just one of the kunsthallen in the world, it's a model but not necessarily that progressive or alternative.

But for most audiences and for our Chinese peers, we are still alternative after ten years of being an active member in the contemporary art field. There should have been more institutions that challenge our positioning. We're one of the more internationally recognized institutions here, but we stay invisible in terms of how we do it and why we're doing it. When we're put into comparison with Para Site in Hong Kong or the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai, one should also understand the different contexts of these institutions.

AK:

And you also have your branch in Berlin, so that's another form of outreach.

NYC:

The other form of outreach is less about different locations but about reaching beyond the populist public perception of “immersive exhibitions” in shopping malls. We might lose some of the younger audiences after the pandemic because people have gotten used to watching videos and shopping from home. If the collective experience of watching a film in a cinema is becoming obsolete, why visit a museum?

AK:

Your museum is still closed, correct? Are you going into the office?

NYC:

Yes, we’re still closed to the public, but we work at the office during the week and our working hours are flexible.

AK:

When will the museum reopen and what are some of the plans that you’re putting in place?

NYC:

We postponed our upcoming exhibition to August because we couldn’t install when kids were still home from school. Even though we do not plan to fly any international artists to China, domestic transportation and travel can still be uncertain, and the situation is changing daily.

AK:

How are the COVID-19 levels in your city right now? We are still very much in the thick of it here in the US.

NYC:

New cases of COVID-19 in Guangzhou are mostly from passengers who arrive from international flights; we haven’t had new local cases for a couple weeks. I think it will be safe to travel domestically in the summer.

AK:

You’ve talked a little bit about how the exhibition is delayed and that the international artists can’t

come in. Are there other things that have deeply impacted the work that you do in this era of the pandemic?

NYC:

I went to Beijing for the Gallery Weekend in May and everybody was happy to see each other after so long. Our travel patterns have been impacted deeply and I'm not sure our young curators and interns will be able to learn as much without being able to see great exhibitions and museums around the world. The good thing is that we have more time to read and learn online, but the risk lies in being overwhelmed by the fragmented contents.

AK:

Thinking about institutional missions, they've been severely affected, at least for the short term and maybe for a longer term than any of us are actually expecting. I'm curious how that affects your institution and in particular how you think about your work. Let's say in this next year, how do you think your mission might be reoriented?

NYC:

We're reoriented towards the potential public beyond the physical restriction of exhibitions. We might experiment with different forms and directions, but we don't have a clear profile of our emergent audience after the pandemic and what might stay relevant for their changing perceptions about the world.

AK:

Right. I think in our normal lives, we're all running around and we're pulled in a million directions. The pandemic has forced us all to slow down for a second, and it's the thing we say we've always wanted, but now that we have it, it's difficult to know how to proceed. The idea of self-care has been on



everyone's radar in recent years, but now we really need to think about health and well-being. Here we are in this time period where we're mostly at home and perhaps it'll allow us to take care of ourselves a little bit more, but there's this real threat of something outside your door that can really affect your health. Where does that enter the space of the museum with regard to its responsibilities to think about the health of both its art workers and audiences? I'm interested in ruminating on the different implications of "health" and what that means in your context.

NYC:

We provide health insurance for all our contracted staff, and the tests and treatment for COVID-19 is funded by the state. During the weekdays we probably have about 50 visitors and for weekends we can have reservations to make safe distance. It's compulsory to wear masks in public spaces and the museum also offers masks for visitors.

AK:

That's a problem here because it has become unnecessarily politicized.

NYC:

Every day I can take a mask provided by the museum. We don't wear them in the office because it's a very small group of people and we've been together all the time. Anyone returning from abroad will need to be quarantined for two weeks in hotels first and then they stay at home for an extra two weeks.

AK:

That's interesting. The Times Museum is on a very high floor, which means you have to get in an elevator. These are all things that we're starting to confront

here in the United States.

NYC:

There are community policies for sterilizing the elevator every 15 minutes or half an hour, and the service is provided by the property management companies or the employees.

AK:

How is the financial well-being of your institution while it's been closed? Has everyone been able to stay employed?

NYC:

I don't know anyone who been laid off because of the pandemic in China, but I've heard that some galleries have cut off salaries for some of their staff. Public museums, which are mostly cultural or historical museums, don't rely on ticket income and the staff salaries are secured by the state-funded system.

The Times Museum is privately funded and our core funder is Times China, a private estate corporation. We charge a symbolic entrance fee and it does not contribute much to our running budget. There are other private museums, such as those in Shanghai which have relied heavily on blockbuster shows promoted by big international galleries. In the prospect of a market recession, the big galleries will not be investing in promoting blue-chip artists in museums. The blockbuster model is a bit shaken. But it's China, so who knows—maybe young people will still line up to enter museums.

AK:

We can't anticipate how this will all shake out, but it's been interesting to see how the weakness of many of our systems has been revealed by this pandemic. We're seeing how capitalism underwrites so much of everything, and we're really seeing those cracks very clearly and in very unexpected places. The things that we took for granted are really the things that are the most unstable. It's fascinating to hear you talk about your day-to-day experiences

in the office because we're still waiting to find out when we're going to go back to our own offices, and it's really nerve wracking. We definitely have new cases every day in Philadelphia and it's not at all under control in the US.

Not to shift the conversation too much, but because you're also part of this geographic region that has a direct relationship to Hong Kong, I'm curious about your perspectives on the pro-democracy movements there. In the US we're currently witnessing a lot of mobilization around the Black Lives Matter movement and calls to end police brutality, which has in turn inspired an international call for racial justice. Because of the stated mission of the Times Museum and your critically-minded program, which seems autonomous from some of these pushes and pulls of the blockbuster market, I'd love to hear your thoughts on what you think of as an institutional responsibility or ethic to respond to what's happening in the world, or what your tactic as a curator is within that context.

#### NYC:

I have to say that there is no gray zone for any museums, institutions, or organizations in China that attempt to engage or be involved in organized actions or protests, but there are spaces for negotiation on different platforms. I believe that we have to think of sustainability in response to our team and also to the communities we helped constitute over the years. We have to survive and learn to grow. I don't want to give a blunt statement about resistance, and I cannot talk about the role of art institutions and

biennials without the historical complexities and local conditions in mind.

In China, contemporary art is very marginal, even in the cultural sector. Again, if we are thinking as a museum or a program, we are supposed to mediate some of the critical perspectives intertwined with our immediate reality. We have yet to find situated and indigenized perspectives to communicate the global sociopolitical topics, which are usually not circulated as critical knowledge in the public sphere. We are honest about our position and we have to work from where we are. We know better than others what can be done and what cannot, and what are the detours that might also lead us to the ends. A lot of times we have to take refuge in the opacity of artistic expression and intellectual discourses and we may easily fall into the traps of elitism.

So, with a topic such as racism, I think we are dealing with two completely different sets of questions. Maybe an audience within a Western museum context has to unlearn the racial epistemologies and colonial representation in the historical narratives and in the museum collection. But for our audiences, we all have to learn together from ground zero. What are we talking about when we talk about ethnocentrism and nationalism? You don't learn about this kind of thing in school here. What are the disparate conditions and narratives of history? Does it ring a bell when we throw some of the abstract terms on the table?

AK:

We're writing our own history every day ourselves, and there are huge gaps in our history books as well. What you're bringing up is very interesting, and I think it relates to Tausif's question earlier about having an opportunity to create a different infrastructure. Maybe part of that is also in response to a condition of knowing what you can and can't do, or in response to a mainstream blockbuster culture of art. I'm very interested in the gray zone you were talking about because it sounds like you're mapping out another kind of infrastructural condition. I'd love to hear where that leads in terms of your hopes for another

path. Maybe it brings in a new generation with a different way of learning.

NYC:

That's for sure. We're witnessing an exponential dissemination of knowledge by a younger generation who are processing critical information differently. A lot of new texts from the humanities and social sciences have been translated into Chinese almost instantly, and then you become aware that these are also topics that we're interested in the arts. People are certainly reading these articles because otherwise they wouldn't be translated.

So, who are these people? There must be a gap between the forms of contemporary art and what these people consider urgent and relevant. We are starting to expand the definition of a museum audience. Maybe they don't need to be here in the museum, for every exhibition, and a lot of people probably won't, but we can also relate to them through other forms of content.

We're organizing a concert that addresses the African populations in Guangzhou. We'll invite African musicians who are based in Guangzhou to play and we'll be streaming it online. We'll also do a podcast in relation to a film we commissioned last year, called *La Chine*, which is about African traders, mostly female, in Guangzhou. We should start from what matters in our here and now. People know what is happening outside of the "Great Firewall" but the question is how to address our global entanglement.

TN:

Maybe in the last few moments of the conversation, we could speculate a little bit together. What is one hope that you have for the future of institutions—given everything that we've experienced collectively as a result of this pandemic—or that you hope we can take away as a lesson or perhaps integrate into our practices as museum practitioners going forward?

NYC:

We cannot presume that things will go back to normal after what we've experienced. For the past few years, in the case of China, I've been wondering whether we need that many museums. Is there another way of

communicating what art is? The series of letters I've been writing for e-flux are more like personal reflections, and I'm also trying to challenge some of the things I used to believe without doubt.

But it's really time for us to question the universal ideal of contemporary art. Is the museum going to be the same after the pandemic? How do we survive this without dismissing everything we have achieved in the past few decades? Contemporary art museums and institutions have a short history in China and are fundamentally precarious as cultural infrastructure and public spaces. We also need some consensus in coping with the crisis, be it local or global.

What might be the critical potential of contemporary art and its related discourses? We have to think of the environmental impacts and the global supply chain of contemporary art. We should critically restructure, but a shared future should also be projected. I would not want to give up hope on our emergent audiences. The pandemic has connected all of us and unsettled some of our epistemological grounds—should we move on by challenging our tendencies of abstraction and universalization in the arts?

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