

Conversation with
JOSELINA CRUZ,
Museum of
Contemporary Art
and Design Manila
(MCAD)

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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Joselina Cruz is Director and Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) in Manila, a free, not-for-profit institution that continues to be the external face of De La Salle—College of Saint Benilde.

With Tausif Noor.

TAUSIF NOOR:

What is your role at MCAD and how long have you been working there?

JOSELINA CRUZ:

I am Director and Curator, and I've been working at MCAD since 2011, when we were just starting to get set up. Our first exhibitions were in 2012.

TN:

MCAD is housed within a university correct? Can you tell us a bit more about the university and MCAD's relationship to it?

JC:

It's housed within the College of Saint Benilde, which is an undergraduate college that is part of the larger De La Salle University system. Within the College of Saint Benilde there are five schools, one of them being the School of Art and Design (SDA), which is where MCAD is located, in the heart of metro Manila. The SDA opened in 2007 and is the newest of the schools. They built a 14-story building for it, that allowed for lots of new technology, with drones for architecture students, 3-D printers for the multimedia students, and they also included a space for exhibitions which they named the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design. It's very forward-looking, but it's still traditional to a degree.

MCAD opened with the scholar and curator Marian Pastor Roces as its first director. We don't have a collection, and the ambition was for the

museum to amass a collection of Filipino design. However, the space wasn't built for that; it's very industrial and there's no way to do proper storage of artworks. When I took over the space, I decided to model it after a kunsthalle and run a program of temporary exhibitions.

TN:

And the museum is free to the public?

JC:

We don't charge admission, and all of our events and programs are free to the public.

TN:

How many people work at MCAD?

JC:

Seven—it's a small team.

TN:

I'd love to know about the rhythm of your exhibition cycle. Do you have a set number of exhibitions that you do per year?

JC:

We have three shows a year, plus one exhibition that we hold in an external space, and the space is always changing depending on the project. Initially, when I was invited to work with the museum, I proposed five exhibitions per year, not knowing that I had no team to work with. I realized that I had to rethink my plans according to both the capacity of the team I was going to put together and the space. We have one big space and a mezzanine. It's been suggested that we divide the space and run two exhibitions simultaneously, but I think you lose the specificity of the space if you do that. It could work, but then it would have a totally different program and vision.

TN:

When you plan your program, do you try to balance between group shows and solo exhibitions? How far out do you plan your program?

JC:

The initial proposal was to do a program with local, regional, and international exhibitions. What I underlined was the idea of working on international exhibitions to help create an identity for the museum, to build towards institutionalization. I was tasked with fundraising as part of my role, and I thought the best way to do this was to produce exhibitions that would cement the space's identity, give it enough, if very short, exhibition history to show prospective donors and supporters that we were serious and that we knew what we were doing. We needed to create a foundation through conscious programming based on solid ideas with a serious curatorial framework. I knew it would take a few years to even establish any recognition about the seriousness of MCAD's potential.

Curatorially, it was important for me to think about the local and to highlight Filipino artists. Then, there would be a group exhibition and also a monographic show, which would engage artists with established practices globally, but in a way that would be relevant for a Filipino audience. It was always at the top of my mind to be in dialogue with a global discourse, but to be doing that within a local context and with a local perspective. When you have traveling exhibitions for instance there typically isn't the opportunity or privilege to think from the local context.

TN:

What's interesting to me about this model is that the discourse of contemporary art seems to constantly circulate around this ambition of merging the local with the global. You see it most clearly in recent biennial or triennial themes. Perhaps, as you mentioned, it's more beneficial to think more in depth from one perspective--the local, to get to the global.

JC:

I've always struggled with this: How do you design a program that's important for the public? When you start thinking of global discourses or artists who speak to those ideas, it has to mean something across the many publics that your space engages with and hopes to engage with. These publics are not always the art publics, but the program has to speak to such publics as well. I don't think you can always rely on educational workshops or public programs as the main conduits to explain an exhibition to a local audience or any

audience for that matter. They are certainly tools, but I think the exhibition has to have the capacity to engage in a visceral way, as an experience. You have to always think about this. The way that I think about it, the museum is continually evolving, and we're always trying to think with it. What does it mean to be in this space, this context, these programs, in our part of the world?

TN:

That leads me to ask a specific question: What do you make of the term "regional"?

JC:

When MCAD first started getting some attention, I was part of a panel at Art Basel with some like-minded leaders of institutions and I shared my ideas about the local, regional, international, and global. Someone from the audience asked me to explain why I used the word "international" instead of global, and it's because the idea of the "international" is a discourse that's understood within my local context, rather than the "global," which is less familiar at this time. This is all to say that these terminologies are all contingent and fluid.

TN:

And they each have genealogies and contexts. I'm thinking about how the term "global" within discourses of contemporary art versus let's say, the development sector—which are not unrelated—and how recently the term "global" has entered into the art historical lexicon.

JC:

You have to think about who is using these terms. There are levels of language that need to be parsed when you present programming depending on your audiences. With the term "regional," I think there are several components, and there are complexities of engagement. I think for a couple of years, there was an expectation for the "regional" to mean Southeast Asia, but over the years, the "regional" and the "international" started becoming more porous.

TN:

I say this quite frequently, but

it's funny that the question of the regional is something we ask non-Western practitioners. And I think there is an idea that the "regional" is also conflated, or at least connected, to the question of relevancy. It's something that institutions are particularly forced to deal with—whether from boards or funders or grant-making bodies. I think these questions are important particularly with newer institutions, because they get to define what exactly a term like "regional" might mean. And again, so many of these terms have such particular histories, such as the geographic terms of "South Asia," or "Southeast Asia" that go back to the Cold War.

JC:

Right, it was the West trying to organize the world on their terms. Before I joined the museum, I was doing research on the "appearance" of Southeast Asian art on a global platform. When you start looking at this, you find that there were only three institutions, early on in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who were collecting Southeast Asian art. It circulated initially through exhibitions like the Asia Pacific Triennale in Brisbane and the Asian Art Triennale in Fukuoka. The "Asian" Art Triennale began in Japan, but the Japanese weren't thinking of Asia exactly as the entire content. They focused on Southeast Asia *as* Asia and you wonder about the resonances and impacts of this rhetoric. These turned up in my research when I went to visit the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan.

The last institution that circulated Southeast Asian art was the Singapore Art Museum, which was established in the 1990s. They decided at one point to only collect Southeast Asian art to consciously define the art of the region. When you start looking at the proposals of these institutions you realize that their ideas of what constituted the "Southeast Asian region," were all very different, and included everywhere from Japan to Mongolia. But this is how collections and the thinking around the "regional" remained for a while; it shows that institutions do play a role in defining boundaries and terms like "regional," for example.

I find this interesting, because I don't have a team of curators, so to start defining it is maybe a little bit megalomaniacal. I think more interesting than defining it is for people to look at the program and think, "What is she creating? What sorts of conversations are coming out?" When I went to school for curating, the idea of the exhibition was a conversation between you and the tutor. It had to be tight, so the arguments you laid out couldn't be argued against, so to speak. There wasn't any room for rupture.

TN:

An analogy that I've heard used is that you have to treat the exhibition as a thesis statement. You don't want people to call you out for having a weak argument.

JC:

So true. The narrative has to be fuller than that. As I started to work on more exhibitions, I realized that while this way of curating was interesting and had its purposes, I didn't really want to tell people what to think or how to think. I wanted to present ideas and have the audience engage with those ideas through works of art. And good works—not works that are used as props for ideas. I don't want exhibitions to simply be a thesis.

TN:

I think a lot of the methods of curating that dominate come through the practice of art history, and the teaching of art history has notoriously been dominated by Western practitioners. These aren't necessarily the methods or the ideas that many artists outside of the Western hemisphere are addressing, so why should we as curators?

JC:

The bottom falls out. What I'm also thinking is that because my career has largely been involved in working with collections, and when you work with historical collections, there are certain expectations that you have to produce, or keep to the narrative that the collection was built upon. But working in a setting without a collection, like ICA or MCAD, we have the capacity to speak

outside of history. I do enjoy working with collections; I think they give your curating a certain rigor dictated by what is in the collection, and then you can find ways to challenge that history. But it's nice to speak outside those narratives.

TN:

You talked a little bit about the funding structure of MCAD. Is it funded through the college?

JC:

It's entirely funded through the college, but I knew from the beginning that in the Philippines, and I'm realizing now many other places, the first thing to get cut in times of austerity is arts and culture. There will be no funding at all if things go south in the country. From early on, it was very important for me that we expand and raise our ambitions from the foundation that we started, even while the first couple of years were funded through the college. You know that if you're going to keep this up, you have to get more money in. About three-and-a-half years ago, I hired a Deputy Director and formally built fundraising into that position and the structure of MCAD.

I had the college agree to a board of advisors for the museum, because there wasn't one—we were directly under the board of trustees of the college. We were considered a department like any other within the entire structure of the college, and this was a challenge. How could we function properly if we were treated as a department in the same way as the Learning Resource Center, which is the college library?

Our stakeholders went beyond that of the college as an audience. We served a public beyond the College. Having a board of advisors with its own network, we got the support to help us raise funds, giving us a means to give the museum a kind of autonomy. There's always a push and pull within the college and the courses to have their own space, and of course, you see more of this ownership happening amongst the course heads, when MCAD started getting more traction, was recognized as having its own reputation (in some instances, separate from the college). We make the effort to maintain our deep connection with the college of course, because we are organically part of it in spite of our programming.

TN:

Right, the college now sees the value—the return on investment, so to speak—of the museum. Part of what your role seems to be is setting expectations for what

the museum needs and how it'll function in the future. You have to push it a little bit further with the budget and the expectations in order to keep things going. But you're also setting standards for an audience as well. You can't assume that everyone is going to get the same thing out of the exhibitions. I'm curious about how you think about your audience.

JC:

At the start the exhibitions were group shows with a lot of artists. I think subconsciously, I wanted to present work and encourage visual engagement to push for an awareness of the capacities of contemporary art, particularly contemporary art that was not painting in the traditional sense. Painting is such an established practice or medium in the Philippines, that I continually think there is a need to be the space where you could go see work which wasn't painting orientated, so we brought in sound and installation to challenge the audience.

TN:

Almost like warming your audiences up, in a way.

JC:

Precisely. At first, we worked with artists who were geographically close to the Philippines, those who were based in Vietnam or Thailand, but also had solid international practices. And we always included a Filipino artist. There's a struggle with a colonial mentality where there's always a "they" that's better than "us." I've always been a believer that whatever is going on elsewhere should be concerns that we too should and must have. The Philippines plays a part in global discourse—economically, politically, socially—and those ideas affect us.

TN:

I know that you also do public programs, and we've discussed that public programs can't make up for what's lacking in an exhibition. Would you say that

now that you've been operating for a few years, that there is a community of people who come to the events at MCAD?

JC:

The first show I opened, I had maybe around a hundred people, if at all—it was very small for anywhere, let alone for Manila! But now, we have about 500 or 600 people who show up for openings, which is great. When we opened Paul Pfeiffer's show we had a queue outside, and that's not something that happens in the Philippines—not for a contemporary art opening. At least not yet. Our openings are important markers for the sort of people who will come later to our programs. It's a kind of thermometer as to the interest.

Starting with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's exhibition *The Serenity of Madness* in 2017, we asked artists to do talks before the show. It used to be that we did the talks after, but we decided that it would be an interesting way to introduce the show—not necessarily because we have audiences that need to be told what to think about complex topics, but because we now have audiences who want to engage in programming before the opening. For Apichatpong's exhibition, we held a public lecture in the theater and we asked for RSVPs. We had space for 500—we didn't think we would fill that, but 600 people showed up. This event was a defining moment for MCAD. It gave us the reputation as one of the few spaces who was seriously engaging artists and ideas on this scale.

TN:

That actually leads directly to my next question: Where is MCAD within the local arts ecology in Manila and in the Philippines? Are there similar spaces, and who do you see yourself in dialogue with either locally or internationally?

JC:

A lot of the spaces in Manila that are the most active and the most interesting are university spaces. There's very little public funding for arts institutions by the government, especially for contemporary art. So, most of the university art museums are, I think, very interesting. Recently, the Museum of Natural History was refurbished and it has been getting an amazing number of audiences, but I haven't had the chance to see inside. Each time I try there's a mad queue outside. As for having conversations or exchanges, it's been very rare because our programs are very different; they all have collections and MCAD doesn't.

In that way we are slightly more flexible, and we also work at a larger scale, size-wise.

Manila's not very big: If there's an artist we show here, there probably won't be a concurrent show with that artist at another museum. But we've been trying to do more collaborations. When Antoni Muntadas came to the Philippines, we had him speak at both MCAD and at Arete, the art center at the Ateneo, a local Jesuit university. The thing is, these local schools also have rivalries, so it's very difficult to say that we're going to work with them! The College will tell us, "Why? We'll give you the money you need, you don't have to work with them!" It becomes a bit fraught, but in recent years they've been more open.

You also have to reckon with the layout and the physical realities of living in Manila. Traffic is really terrible, and people aren't going to want to travel across the city to attend multiple events in one night. Those are things that we have to think about as well.

TN:

Going along with that, I was wondering how you think about accessibility as an institution, and its various forms. You've mentioned the way you make exhibitions conceptually more accessible and warming up your audiences, but do you also have bilingual materials or other ways of addressing accessibility?

JC:

MCAD does not yet offer bilingual materials, but we do have materials that are designed and developed for those with disabilities, especially the deaf. We don't have the capacity to do bilingual materials yet, and this has to be checked and re-checked properly. We've recently reviewed our mission statement and vision when we celebrated our 10th anniversary, and we've been more explicit about the large demographic we cater to. We've been quite keen on looking at the section of the public who may not know about the kind of art or the kinds of subjects we bring to the museum, but who do have other knowledge that they bring with them. It becomes a partnership with the constituents who visit us.

TN:

You've worked on large scale international exhibitions like

the Venice Biennial. How would you compare your experience working at that scale to your curatorial work at MCAD? Do you prefer one over the other?

JC:

I've been critical of large-scale exhibitions and biennials. I think intimate, smaller shows are more interesting because you can work more closely with the artist and parse out the concepts. When you work with smaller shows, the positions of the art you include or the artists you decide to work with are necessarily more distilled, and in a way, more thoughtful. You have the possibility of being more precise—you're not plugging things in. It's like poetry.

TN:

It goes back to what we were talking about earlier. There's more room for experimentation in a place like MCAD, where you get to define the program and the expectations.

JC:

And it's not just room for experimentation for the curator, but also the artists, and the public. It's been interesting for me, especially at the moment, because as a curator, I don't pretend to know everything. We all have our specializations, and more than that, we have our own interests, things that pull us in and that we find fascinating. But as a curator, you have a bigger responsibility than your interests. You don't live in a vacuum. You speak to a larger discourse of the networks of your peers and colleagues that you engage with and you'll know what shapes a zeitgeist and respond accordingly to the ideas that are going on in the world. Even if I'm not interested in some things as a curator, I'll engage with those areas of contemporary art and thinking instead of rejecting them. You have to think of them as proposals, as challenges, and as ways to invite in other knowledge that you don't have.

For me, this is freeing. It allows an openness and generosity towards what exhibitions can do. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière talks about the "ignoramus scholar," wherein the student never becomes more learned than the teacher, because there's always this gap. The teacher's position is to teach, so they keep adding more knowledge, knowledge that the student is not supposed to have—the teacher is always having to be one step ahead. Rancière says that we have to stop thinking in this way.

TN:

I think that's an interesting proposal. Thinking of the valence of the word "exhibition," it often has this dimension of showing off rather than just "showing," or "exhibiting." The "exhibition" might come from a place of humility.

To wrap things up, I wanted to ask two final questions: What are some of the challenges that you've faced in your role, and what are you excited about in the future?

JC:

The challenges seem to be in figuring out the correct people to collaborate and work with. The people you work with really does affect the show, and I think for me, it's important to have an organic way of working because it does manifest itself in the exhibition.

Another challenge is trying to establish benchmarks and standards in the Philippines. In the beginning, it seemed like everything I'd do was fine, but it's important to me to have a certain set of standards and expectations. That's the minimum. It has to have meaning, and it has to have relevance. For all of the openness of an exhibition's concept, the way it occupies space is also very important.

What I'm excited about is to move MCAD forward beyond just exhibitions, and the way to do that is to start thinking about MCAD as a knowledge producer. The sharing of knowledge is really important, and we are now looking at producing publications and more public programming beyond public lectures, and are starting to think of conferences and larger symposia, having residencies. For all of our intentions to produce public knowledge through art exhibitions, an exhibition is still seen by and large as a one-way exchange. About three or four years ago, we decided that we need to go in the direction of having the museum start speaking *as an institution*, not just a place for exhibitions. We have to start actively producing knowledge as an institution, and that's how you start speaking as one.
