

Conversation with
ALEX GARTENFELD,
ICA Miami

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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ALEX GARTENFELD, ICA Miami

Alex Gartenfeld is Artistic Director at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (ICA) in Miami, FL.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

Alex Klein

It's interesting for us to think about other institutes with regard to where we see ourselves in the institutional landscape. Just to begin with some of the basics, what is your role?

ALEX GARTENFELD

My title is Artistic Director at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (ICA Miami).

AK

How long have you had that position?

AG

I've been with the organization since May of 2013. My title has changed several times throughout that tenure. I began as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). I had two stints as the Interim Director at ICA Miami. As of the end of April, I am the Artistic Director, which effectively combines the Director and Chief Curator positions.

AK

Is there another director above you?

AG

There's not — just our Board of Trustees.

AK

That is another reason that

we were especially interested to speak with you because you've had an evolving role institutionally. How many people are currently working in the organization?

AG

Around 30 people.

AK

When did your new building open?

AG

December 2017. Before then, we were operating in a temporary space. We launched the organization in the spring of 2014. We opened our doors in a temporary space in the Moore Building in the Miami Design District (MDD) in December 2014. This was simultaneous to launching the onset of the institutional capital campaign, accompanied by a sustainability campaign that allowed us to successfully open and launch the organization.

AK

What was the inception of the ICA Miami? Can you tell us about the background history of its formation?

AG

It is a compelling story. I was hired as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. The Board of Trustees had developed a 10-year strategic plan that obviously pre-existed my employment, which included a growth plan for the organization. There had been at the board level about 10 years of discovery into growth both on-site and at other sites throughout the Miami region. Just after I became Interim Director — which happened around July of 2013 — and the Board of Trustees and I elected to move on that strategic plan. That coincided with some of the major gifts that facilitated the expansion of the organization. At that time, we had a landlord agreement with the city of North Miami, so we started a 501(c)(3) and thus were tasked with the very exciting and very appropriate opportunity to rename the organization. As a board and staff, we thought this question of the institute and institutionality was central to defining what the organization would be — obviously the term “museum” and museology is an expansive term in our

field. As a concept, “institute” spoke to us about the period of production we are working with, which interprets work of the post-war period through the most contemporary work being made today. This is reflected through our permanent collection. We are semi-unique as you will obviously know as an ICA Miami for having a permanent collection.

AK

Right, we are non-collecting, but Boston also has one.

AG

The deployment of the word “institute” vis-a-vis the collection for us had to do with the way that we interpreted collection building, specifically and strategically within the context of a 21st-century museum—which cannot do everything.

I’ll add that our mission is “the exchange of art and ideas.” Thus we consider the framework of that word “institute” as reflective of that mission as we endeavor to connect contemporary art to our audiences, but also to the material and social histories to which they belong.

AK

Let’s begin with that terminology. You brought up the museum versus the institute, and one of the impetuses for this project was thinking critically about the language of any institution as a kind of architecture. “ICA” is the thing that an audience will encounter before they even enter the building. At least here in Philadelphia, we often get the response, “Well, what is an ICA? Are you a place that I can come and see art?” An Institute of Contemporary Art can sometimes be a confusing thing for a general audience. I’m curious to hear more about the decisions that went into the terminology of being an ICA. Was there a thought that you wanted to be linked to the other ICAs

that are out there? We often get the question: Are you related to the other ICA's?

AG

I've encountered less confusion about whether we're showing contemporary art. That is how we have entered people's consciousness, and it's one of the many reasons that we elected to rename ourselves as an ICA.

One of the other considerations was scale, which you spoke to. It's interesting that you referred to an institute as architecture in a metaphorical sense. I think our name actually also has to do with our physical architecture and how we fit into the community of which we're a part. One of the ways that ethos permeates our architecture is that we are atypically heavy on program space. I don't mean public program space — I mean exhibition space. It's a program first museum, it is not a storage first museum; it's not an admin space museum. Sixty percent of our space is utilized for gallery space. It's interesting that you framed the same confusion or discourse of the institute around that problematic. For us, deploying the word institute was meant to emphasize how focused we are on exhibitions and public programming.

Lastly, like other museums—and like yourselves, I'm sure—we have robust daily, weekly, and monthly education programs. Where we have kind of set ourselves apart within the context, certainly locally, and hopefully nationally, is a focus on advanced level and theoretical applications of education, led by our curator of programs, Gean Moreno.

All of our programs, in fact, whether they're teen programs, outreach programs, as well as that advanced level program, are geared towards excellence and experimentation in critical thinking, rather than practice-based. We think of the word and the mantra of the "institute" as carrying across not just exhibition programs, but our educational offerings as well.

AK

That's really interesting to me. I think perhaps some of the confusion on our end is because we are part of a university. We are already in the context of higher learning. Being an institute can be confusing within our context. The academic aspect is part of our roots within the architecture department at Penn. Part of this project has also been

thinking more about reclaiming “institute” as a verb — to institute things.

TAUSIF NOOR

Looking at ICA Miami’s model of offering an advanced level of courses, I’m thinking about the institute also as a space where this discursive learning can happen, but not necessarily through exhibitions. A lot of museum education revolves around the model of “Learn about contemporary art through this exhibition,” whereas there seems to be more of an emphasis at ICA Miami to learn about contemporary art and theory through a course that’s independent of a traveling exhibition or something like that. Would you say that’s the case?

AG

Definitely, I would. Alex, you brought up earlier that the term “institute” belongs to a network of museums but museum professionals, and colleagues. Certainly it connects our curatorial team (this program basically lives within curatorial). Certainly, we think nationally and internationally in terms of our programmatic reach. And within our regional context, Miami is a city with an abundance of interest in the arts and a kind of fascination with the marketplace. Certainly Art Basel Miami Beach galvanized a lot of value for and interest in this community, and one can safely say ICA would not exist without the art fair, and not just in that week, but in the long-term sustainability of this community as a cultural capital — which all major 21st century cities are, for better or for worse. What I would say, is that the second, or kind of twin inspiration, for this program and its success is the notion — shared by our staff and our Board of Trustees — is that for a city like Miami to be sustainable as an arts capital and to have an impact long-term it needs to not just repair, but actually generate parts of its infrastructure that were never built.

Miami is not a Northeastern city; it’s not a European city. It’s a city that you could say is rebuilt every seven years. From an educational perspective, it’s being built right now, and so this particular program was fulfilling a specific

need and a desire for advanced-level education and professional training that would otherwise not exist. We've partnered here with a university that is looking towards critical thinking, experimentation, and theoretical practice, which is FIU. It's really a quite large university. Its arts department is relatively small, but it happens to have energetic arts professionals leading the program or engaged with the program, as well as a hybridized curatorial and fine arts program. We partnered with them to offer their students credit. The courses are by application, and they're available to anybody, but people who are enrolled in the FIU program actually receive credit for taking the class.

AK

I think it's so smart that that's built into your vision and strategic plan for the institution: educating your audience or the collectors base or the people in your community into the language that you're working with as opposed to watering it down. Which is so often the approach of institutions. It sounds like you are saying, "We can build this up together, and we can become a community that's all invested in the things that we're working on," which I think is a very interesting approach.

AG

Well it's a layered contention about the way that a museum or institute might address its audiences, and we try and meet people at their level. Certainly we have programs that equip people with fundamental vocabularies for exhibitions, but certainly, specifically looking at our regional peers and taking on the mantle of institute — in no short thanks to some of the visionary but hands-off leadership of our Board of Trustees — we're able to execute those programs in such a way that it satisfies the multiple constituencies. I will say that our research center, in particular, caters primarily to artists and arts professionals, although we also have public-facing lectures for a more general audience. But the seminars themselves, which are quite demanding even from a time commitment perspective, tend to be arts professionals who are looking to develop or engage in a vocabulary that is not offered elsewhere.

AK

Do you feel like it's filling a hole that doesn't exist in the kind of pedagogical system that's in place in Miami?

AG

It's seeking to fill one of many. This is an amazing city, from a philanthropic, sociological and economic perspective. But in terms of raising a middle-class of arts professionals, there are major things lacking: whether it's long-term or short-term arts employment, education, transportation, or affordable places to live. Certainly our program responds to what are very material shortages. Not to speak in grandiose terms about the program, but I think it responds to a condition in which people aren't offered services that ought to be required in the academy.

AK

Are they free?

AG

The seminars have a minimal reservation cost, so we'll hold a deposit so participants will show up. But otherwise yes, all of our programs are free.

AK

Is your admission free?

AG

Yes

AK

Great. And just circling back to your collection, what are the parameters of your collection with this idea of being a post-war contemporary institution, how do you define the contemporary? How do you continue to shape a collection in an institute context?

AG

Vis-à-vis the terminology of an institute, our collection is not encyclopedic. We can't do it all, and won't do it all. We're not that enormous of a building; we don't have designated collection space; we don't store off-site, etc. So we have about enough — four to five hundred works in the collection at this

particular moment, the earliest being a painting by William Copley Longpoint in 1957, the most recent being acquired two weeks ago or last week or yesterday. We have an acquisitions committee, and a dedicated group of donors who work directly with our curatorial team and with me on making the priorities.

What we did when we actually launched the organization was divide our collection into eight or nine categories. Some of them are broad, some are narrow, some of them are historical, some geographic or identity-driven in order to determine where we had strengths that we could actually build from, and also to think what was missing in that equation. Things as general as Latin American art or work by black artists, artists from the African diaspora, photography, post-war sculpture, queer artists and media and others.

We have built genealogies within the existing holdings of the museum and sought to build from them. A concrete example just from Latin America would be — this is very simplistic — is the museum has four works by Gabriel Orozco and now three works by Francis Alÿs, and we have more by Pedro Reyes, and we're doing a show with Damián Ortega, so it made a lot of sense for us to bring this into our last acquisitions meeting where we gave presentations about genealogies in Latin American art to bring work by Damián into the collection at that meeting. We're also, and this is where we can make strategic acquisitions, working on the next generation of people who belong to that lineage, and we can also take risks insofar as doing that.

AK

Is there also a sense of responsibility to the local community with regard to acquisitions?

AG

Yes absolutely, and we work with a number of enlightened donors, who are specifically dedicated to making long-term promised gifts of works by leading Miami-based artists. So absolutely, it's a key engagement of the museum and its collection.

AK

You made a point early on about saying that the building is devoted primarily to programmatic space, so is most of your collection housed on site? Did you build in room for that collection to grow? And

to what point? Oftentimes a collection is certainly an asset, but it can also be something that weighs you down.

AG

We store offsite now as we have now for almost 10 years. Given our building's value and its surrounding real estate, it does not make sense for us to store on site.

I refer to our collection as both an engine and a record of our exhibition program, so I like there to be a correlation or correspondence for the exhibition. Our special exhibition galleries are totally open plan. We had a quite important group of surrogates by Allan McCollum, which was one of the inspirations for us to organize the survey of Allan McCollum in 2020. We have a stalagmite by Sterling Ruby in our collection and that was an inspiration for collaborating with ICA Boston Chief Curator Eva Respini, on Sterling Ruby's show for 2019.

Our ground floor is divided into six spaces, each of which has a specific purpose and some of which are specifically zoned, as it were, for the collection. What we do with our collections on the ground floor, as an institute, is to build a folio of research around the work and the period during which it was made, in order to present a truncated research exhibition. An example is a William Copley Longpoint painting from his first show in the United States. The painting is from 1957 and I believe the show was in 1960 at Alexander Iolas. Stephanie Seidel, our Associate Curator, is researching paintings that Copley made that showed around that time, 1957 to 1958, and looking at some of the key themes within that body of work.

AK

It doesn't sound like you're going to put a cap on the collection. It sounds like an evolving and natural acquisition process.

AG

We have five or six acquisition committee meetings a year. Ultimately as an organization you have to be flexible, based upon what donors are coming to you, but we actually do gear every meeting toward a specific theme. In the last meeting we completed buying Unfulfilled Promise, an Allora and Calzadilla work that the museum commissioned, so we organized the presentation of "Latin American artists" in the collection, building towards the strategic expansion that we were seeking to achieve.

AK

It's an interesting question because as the Artistic Director you have the opportunity to implement this vision and you have a new building that you were instrumental in shaping. There is a sense, I think, in all institutions of when to cap growth. I think we're all trying to add more staff, add more programs, increase our budgets, all these things, but maybe you're not?

AG

We're not actually.

AK

Do you have a goal of where you feel comfortable size-wise as an institution?

AG

We do. We have a strategic plan and we have consensus of executive staff and leadership at the trustee level. We propose an incremental budget plan, with modest and strategic increases that reflect our priorities and what we have learned in a new building, but our strategic growth at this particular juncture is around sustainability, endowment, collection, cultivation of community, and the consolidation of programs. The strategic plan has different metrics and none of them are about creating a massive new building.

AK

How many curators do you have?

AG

It's myself, Gean Moreno, Curator of Programs; Stephanie Seidel, Associate Curator; and then we have a Curatorial Assistant, Amanda Morgan; and Exhibitions and Preparator teams.

AK

So it's a tight team.

AG

It's small. In terms of investment, the modesty of our investment in payroll allows us to have generosity and flexibility in terms of our exhibitions and public programs.

AK

Can you go back and clarify that?

AG

Relatively, a very low percentage of our budget is spent on payroll and that means a significant investment in exhibitions and improving the architecture. This corresponds to the number of staffers, rather than our employees rates, which we seek to be just and in synch with AAMD standard.

TN

I was curious about ICA's positioning amidst the commercial landscape of Miami. With the fair and with design, there is a lot of commercial focus. How does ICA Miami see its position within a landscape that's commercial-centric? I don't know if it's any more or less commercial-centric than New York but there is that atmosphere.

AG

Certainly the city has a specific symbolism of capitalism that this museum seeks to address and complicate. I don't know if you ever worked with them, but the team at Art Basel and the MCH Group are extremely sophisticated. They know that in order for them to have a fabulous art fair they need to provide things that pique other people's interest, not just during the fair, but before and after it, and they are deep thinkers in that regard.

Speaking curatorially, what's more interesting than the fact that Miami hosts this marketplace is that the city is symbolic of emergent forms of the market. That is something we obliquely and directly reference, through our research center, exhibitions, and programs.

I don't know if I satisfactorily responded to your question, but I tend not to deal with cliché images of Miami. There's also a micro-literary tradition that's kind of a contemporary way of describing Miami as a tropical marketplace. I find this somewhat banal, but I am interested in

our relationship to South America and our relationship to global cities. I'm interested in our relationship to digital infrastructure. I think those are interesting emerging fields that have potential at the museum.

TN

Just thinking about Miami's proximity to something like the Havana Biennial — are you looking globally when you think about exhibitions or an audience?

AG

Definitely. Obviously the Havana Biennial is a signal example of redefining a thought space through exhibition-making and political context. We belong to a very different context in Miami, even though the city is home to many generations of Cuban immigrants.

But we think of our programs as situated within an American context and a global context. Among our regional colleagues, the Pérez Art Museum has made a concerted effort to address Latin America as a primary focus. It has also taken a specific pedagogical approach and narrates certain important histories of the relationship between Miami and Latin America. That's not to say that we're not aligning with some of the same traditions, but their inquiry gives us the opportunity to hopefully, in some cases, propose alternatives.

TN

Right, so because there is someone focusing on them in the landscape, you also have opportunities to complicate that or look elsewhere?

AG

This belongs more to the conversations around institutions and museums. For instance, the Philadelphia Museum of Art is sort of the museum "of record," and you're allowed to respond because they have 900 years of history and at ICA Philadelphia you can reinvent yourself every whatever the number of years. We don't have that same heritage in Miami. That said, with the role, institutionally and scale-wise that the Pérez Art Museum took, and the fact that they launched their institution three or four years before us, as an institute, we are able to respond in nimble and strategic ways to the mission, the didactic approach, the educational offerings, the admission structure, the way we work with the community, the way we fundraise. Really, across the board, we were able to look at the "dominant paradigm," and propose

something that would differ by offering something unique to a general audience, as well as to an audience for funding the museum.

AK

Audience is a very tricky question, but I'm curious who you see as your audience and also if that audience changes because you do have these things like the fair swoop in for a dense period of time and then leave. I'm assuming they're people who come through Miami in these large clusters and then leave. Who is your primary audience?

AG

Indeed, audience is a complex and very segmented question. When we build programs for a general audience, which is inevitably incredibly diverse, we try to meet them where they are.

That said, Miami is home to some idiosyncratic travel patterns. The word "snowbird" is outdated, but there are seasonal residents specifically incentivized by the tax structure. The summer bears witness to a very high frequency of South American travelers, Spanish-speaking, Portuguese-speaking people, who otherwise miss the global schlep of the art world, and come to Miami for the summer. Certainly we have that one week during Art Basel where we specifically present to international collectors and art professionals.

AK

Do you deal with that on the level of language too? I know the Pérez is bilingual.

AG

This is one of our strategic goals. It's a place where we are not yet passing our own test. We are not yet as multilingual as we would like to be. A small number of our programs are translated.

AK

What is the location that you're in, and also what was that move to your new location?

AG

We are in the Miami Design District. We literally just moved about two blocks.

AK

What is that context? Can you talk about that?

AG

Sure—it's interesting and complex. We think of ourselves as having two facades, one of which is in the Design District, primarily comprised of new construction, which is retail storefront. It's geared toward high luxury, although also servicing more and more a broader stream of tourist and consumer constituencies. On our other side, our sculpture garden faces directly into the Buena Vista neighborhood, which is a middle-class, low density zoned residential neighborhood. Within 10 blocks of us is Midtown, which is a middle-class professional development, and Little Haiti, which is a historically immigrant — but also perhaps in the most contested region in Miami today — and quickly gentrifying neighborhood. Edgewater and Liberty City are within 20 blocks, which means a 10-minute drive; Wynwood, which is also a quite heterogeneous neighborhood. We happen to be in the center of many, many different ecosystems, which informs our perception of our audience certainly.

AK

You have this distinction of being both director and curator, and I'm curious if that comes naturally and symbiotically to you, or if it's something that you feel you sometimes have to take your director hat off and think curatorially, or vice-versa. That's a big question in the field: curators who become directors and then find that they don't have as much time for the director part, etc. How does that work for you?

AG

I'm not sure if I know how to respond. I don't necessarily think of them as different hats just because of the very unique blessing of having been involved with the origination of the organization. So, that makes my relationships to

our community of supporters somewhat unique perhaps for someone in my position.

Of course, speaking as a human being, one always seeks to reconcile what they consider to be personal priorities with institutional priorities. That's something that we all, as youngish people, work on, and I'm certainly not a perfect example of that at all.

Tonight, I'm doing a talk with Abigail DeVille at the museum, for which I've had to prepare and research to some extent, and we're opening an exhibition in about two weeks. Other days I am entirely concentrated on fundraising around programs, or our gala. What can I say?

AK

I wonder if starting off from a curatorial position that really very quickly became a kind of directorial position, if that allows you another kind of advocacy within curatorial?

AG

It definitely empowers curatorial in our institution. I speak to colleagues about other museums where there's some power struggle between marketing and curatorial, or education and curatorial. And maybe some of those things still happen here, but probably not with the same sense of parity in terms of the decision-making.

And to be quite honest, I'm not a big fan of the idea of an artistic director. I actually think both jobs are complex, it just so happens, that my job with this institution is somewhat unique and I appreciate it, so that happens to be my current title.

AK

Okay very good I won't push you any further on that. I'm curious because also then you just had this experience of being able to work curatorially for another institution during the New Museum Triennial and I'm wondering if that allowed you another kind of space where you able to shift roles for a second?

AG

At that time I wasn't the director during that period of three years; I was

Deputy Director and Chief Curator.

AK

Do you feel that there are certain frustrations that you have at this juncture or do you feel everything is just moving the way that you want it to go towards a sustainability plan. What have been some of the biggest roadblocks for you that you feel comfortable sharing?

AG

I would say one of the biggest challenges that we had to overcome with the launch of this organization, and we have done a good job of changing the culture, was that the cliché of philanthropy in Miami was that people support more deeply in New York. Right now, we are seeing the first generation of donors in Miami who are saying that this community is important; that there are leaders here and they need to support it. It's happened in other fields — hospitals are huge, the universities are huge. Within the nonprofit culture sphere, it really had not happened before. So education about the role and importance of institutions has been important.

As I was speaking about the holes in infrastructure here and the lack of support for young art professionals, that is another key effort of mine— attracting arts professionals and cultural leaders to the city in ways they exist elsewhere.

AK

Right, and I'm assuming some of your job as the Director can be done in New York and other major cities where you're doing fundraising. I wanted to circle back to that question of who you feel are your peers. Or, who are your actual peers, and who are your conceptual peers, your philosophical peers, past, present, future. Who do you want to be in dialogue with?

Our Deputy Director Tommy Pace has really taken the lead on consolidating and coordinating relationships with some of our international peers. With Stefan Kalmar at ICA London, ICA Miami put out a call for a community of organizations like yourselves, who are thinking about institutionality in a way that we felt kindred with. I think the group of people that we reached out to initially speaks to some of the professionals I see as our peers.
