

Conversation with
ALLISON FREEDMAN
WEISBERG AND GEE
WESLEY, Recess

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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04.10.18

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Recess

Allison Freedman Weisberg is the Founder and Executive Director and Gee Wesley is the former Program Director of Recess, a nonprofit art space that partners with artists to build a more equitable and just creative community.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

TAUSIF NOOR

Can you tell us about the history of Recess and what your role is? When and why was Recess founded, and what was your goal for the organization?

ALLISON FREEDMAN WEISBERG

I'm the Executive Director and Founder. I started Recess in 2009, after working in large institutions in New York. I worked at MoMA in their Education Department, and then at the Whitney Museum of American Art in their Contemporary Art Branch Museum, which is now defunct, and then at the main Whitney Museum building after the Contemporary Art Branch closed.

ALEX KLEIN

Was it the Altria Space?

AFW

Yes. I loved that space. I was in charge of education there, but it was a department of just me.

AK

It's similar to when the Guggenheim had that outpost downtown in SoHo.

AFW

Yes, it was very popular in the 1980s to have these branch museums because they offered a tax loophole to corporations lending space to nonprofits. Some of the museums even had branches in Connecticut. It was just a thing that happened for a second in art history. But as soon as the contract with Altria ended, those 25 years were over, and we were out. Then, I went and worked at the Whitney Museum uptown and was in charge of Youth and Community Programs.

In 2008, I got to work with a bunch of artists who were in the Whitney Biennial to offer education programs in conjunction with the Biennial. Specifically, I worked on the capsule project that happened at the Armory that year, which had a much more raw and process-based vibe. There were a lot of large-scale performances. There were also artists that were inhabiting weird, little rooms at the Armory, and all the projects were very participatory.

AK

Oh, I remember that.

AFW

It was critically panned. People were like, "Why is the Whitney doing this? This makes no sense. Why is this part of the Biennial?" But for me, from an educator's standpoint, it was by far the most exciting, and that was because my job was seeing organic relationships form among artists and audiences and the sort of weird side conversations that would ensue every day. I was able to see firsthand the relationships that form in a space where an artist is present and able to advocate for their work and their process—not just in its final stage, but more like, "This is what I'm doing. This is why I'm doing it."

A few months after the 2008 Biennial, there was a project in the Whitney Lobby Gallery by Corin Hewitt. I had Corin working with a group of teenagers during the process, and seeing Corin unpack the literal dynamic that I had been puzzling over prompted me to ask a number of really critical questions: What are the walls of the gallery? What's the divide between studio space and exhibition space? What are the invisible borders? What are the behavioral expectations in both spaces? I was also in grad school at the time, and thinking on a much more theoretical level about the temporal model that exists in a studio that doesn't exist elsewhere. What is the temporal model for art viewers? Where is there an overlap in those models? What can we sort of glean from that overlapping space? What are the possibilities within that? All of these ideas about audience engagement, in the context of the art being present were percolating in my mind.

I knew that I wanted to leave the museum world. I had started to get a little bit frustrated seeing a lot of really exciting artists' projects on the table that were retrofitted to institutional model of the white cube—not because

institutions are evil, but just because they have large-scale, bureaucratic structures that have to be accommodated. I was ready to take a step away from the museum world. It was also the height of the financial crisis, which came with its own opportunities. Since we were kind of at rock bottom, there was this moment of possibility, where you could start something that would have a future. Alongside this sense of possibility were also a bunch of real estate opportunities. So, I found a space in SoHo, which was our space for the first eight years.

AK

I am curious about your former location. Today, we mostly think of SoHo as an expensive commercial district. How did you find your original home?

AFW

The impetus behind Recess, from the very beginning, has always been creating a space for artists and audiences to meet and make something together—whether that something is meaning or community or art. The underlying assumption was that it would be critical, rigorous, and intentional. We needed to build a more inclusive, creative community, something that was more reflective of the New York public. It felt really radical to do that in a highly visible, commercial neighborhood. It would be one thing to do that in Bushwick or Ridgewood, but it was initially really important to insist that these folks that are making and thinking and generating deserve a platform that has a huge amount of visibility. One of the things that differentiated Recess from other emerging spaces was saying that we deserved to be in that location. We wanted to take up space in an established arts community. To be honest, that has become less important to me over the years, as we've built a community of our own that feels really robust. Now, it feels like we can exist anywhere.

AK

Right, so it doesn't need to be in SoHo where you have this constant stream of passersby. It can become more of a destination.

AFW

Exactly. I think that as Recess grew as a community with each season of artists, those artists became really central members of our community and so did our audiences and program participants. As that started to happen, the

location almost became secondary. It was more about how to actually build this community. Now, it's important for us to set down roots. We're 10 years in, and we are in this new space in Brooklyn with a 10-year lease. Prior to this, we've only ever had a three-year lease, so we're really excited to establish permanence, or at least relative permanence. We want to create relationships with the community immediately surrounding this neighborhood. When we were looking for a space, where we landed seemed less important. What was important to us was landing in a space where we could build that community in a really intentional and inclusive way.

AK

Who do you think of as your community? It seems that you have both a community that has grown up with you and will travel to you, as well as a community right outside your building.

AFW

Initially, our community was made from the artists who had participated in the program. They were the most vital heartbeat of that community. Recess has lovingly been described as a cult where, once you go through the program, you've been indoctrinated, and you can't really leave—not because we're holding anybody here, but because people want to be here. It's almost like a roommate situation for these months that artists share space with us.

In the past two years we've been working intensively on a new initiative called Assembly, which is an artist-led diversion program for court-involved youth. That was actually our first foray into thinking really aggressively about how to actively build this community for both artists and audiences, rather than creating it based on who was almost incidentally coming into the space. Our artists and audiences and participants have always been at the heart of the organization.

AK

Is your community the same thing as your audience?

AFW

I think for Recess, yes. We tend to use the world audience pretty fluidly because we never want to create a fishbowl situation where an artist is working and someone is watching. So, an audience, for us, very much implies an active participant and an active learner. It's someone who is asking questions, or who is participating actively and performatively in a piece of

work. And now, those audiences also include our Assembly participants and our Peer Leaders, who stay on at the organization for upwards of a year after their initial engagement.

We're hoping that some of the folks who have been through our program, specifically, in the context of Assembly, are also becoming leaders of that program. They take the material that they learned in the program beyond Recess into their own communities and in their work in other institutions.

AK

Backtracking to when you first started Recess, what kind of capital did you need to accrue to start the organization? Did you assemble an advisory board? Did you fundraise? How did you lay the groundwork?

AFW

The first thing I did was invite Corin Hewitt to be the first artist. That was really important to me because I knew that he was exploring ideas that were interesting and from the creative side of the aisle. I felt like it would be a really great way to hit the ground running. He stayed very involved in the organization, and became a board member for I think about three years. I remember walking by the space with him, before it was officially ours, and I was like, "I think this is the space, but you can't go inside. But I can tell you that I think this is going to be our space, and I'd love you to do this project!"

We were going to have to do some creative imagining work to prepare and, in terms of the financial side of it, that was definitely a leap into the deep end. We raised enough money for the first six months of rent and for Corin's project and two others. And then, we would continue raising enough money to keep the lights on. I'm sure you've heard this from lots of people who have started organizations, but you can't start an organization without money. And you can't get money without an organization.

AK

Exactly.

AFW

So, that initial fear was definitely like, "This is crazy."

TN

How is it structured now? There's a board, right?

AFW

Yes, we have an advisory board. And that's made up of folks who are giving in-kind to the organization in some way. There are folks who sit on our selection panel. There are people who have been at Recess as employees and have a unique perspective and can meet with us and counsel on other things. And then, we have a more traditional Board of Directors, which is composed of 11 individuals that do more nuts and bolts of board governance.

AK

They help with fundraising?

AFW

They do, yes. There's a give/get expectation. They help with fundraising.

AK

Was that something you had experience with before?

AFW

Not really. At museums, I did a lot of grant writing for programs, but I had no experience with board development. I had no experience with a fundraising scenario where, if you didn't get the grant, you couldn't do the program. At a museum, you apply for the grants, you write the grants, you get the grants. But it's this weird, imaginary process where if you don't get the grant magically, there's still money in the pot. I remember once in the context of an after-school program that I ran that we didn't get this big grant. We had a meeting about it I thought to myself, "I totally don't even understand what the problem is here because I can see the balance is fine." It's almost an imaginary process. But, obviously, all of those grants are important to making up the museum's bottom line.

AK

How did you jump in right from the beginning? Did you have people who helped you along the way with advice?

AFW

Yes, for sure. I don't think that Recess really became viable until 2010, when I hired an employee and started paying myself.

AK

When you started, was it just you?

AFW

It was me and two interns who were both named Sarah.

AK

How did you find the space?

AFW

I found it on Craigslist. I was really young— the kind of young where it doesn't matter if you try something major that doesn't work. I felt like it was this experimental project in its first year. Then we started getting some grants and some visibility. There were some artists that had participated in the program that were having some traction. I finally thought, "Maybe this is viable."

AK

Was there a moment when you felt the transition from Recess being a personal project to Recess as a public organization, or even an institution?

AFW

Yes. We went from being a project to being a startup, and then, had another transition from being a startup to becoming an organization. That happened at around five years.

AK

What are you now?

AFW

I tend to think of us as an organization. The word institute is interesting to me. I tend to shy away from the word institutional because I associate it with museums. But institute has more of a register of learning and exploration, which is funny because basically, they're the same word. When I describe Recess, I talk about it as a nonprofit arts organization or a nonprofit art space.

AK

How many employees are there now?

AFW

We're in a moment of transition. But there are four employees, and we always have at least one intern. So, we're about to be five full-time.

AK

What are the positions?

AFW

The positions are another change that we're working out right now in the context of this hiring process. Changing up the positions a little bit is allowing us a moment of reflection to think about what the needs of the organization are, and how we can shift a little bit. So, we're playing a game of musical chairs in the context of this hiring process, which is also because the Assembly program is growing very quickly. It's taken up a lot of organizational head space and staff time.

AK

Is Assembly run out of this building, or is that in another location?

AFW

It's in another location. We have a two-year stint at a satellite space in downtown Brooklyn that's coming to an end. But in 2019, it will move over to our main space.

AK

So, the current building is eventually going to accommodate all of the programs at Recess?

AFW

Yes, we chose this space knowing that we would have to move the Assembly program over. I'm really looking forward to having everything under one roof, and we're working hyper-locally in this neighborhood. One of the other reasons we chose this neighborhood is because it's within walking distance of four housing projects. We're really interested in expanding this creative community to involve those neighbors specifically.

AK

And the Assembly program will be rooted here and reach into the neighborhood?

AFW

Exactly. And not just the Assembly program. It's my hope that this amorphous thing that we call our inclusive community will apply to all of our programs. We have the Session program downstairs. We also have a critical writing program and our online residency. We've always been really confident in telling the story of each of our programs and letting that speak for the organization. Instead of saying, "This is what Recess does," we say, "Here's this program, and here's that program, and here are these two programs."

They're all moving toward what we think of as our organizational mission. But we're working on thinking more holistically: What is it that Recess does? What is the space that Recess takes up? How are those programs sort of in service of that thing?

TN

Can you describe each of the programs?

AFW

The Assembly program is a diversion program for court-involved youth in partnership with Brooklyn Justice Initiatives. It was conceived with and is led by Shaun Leonardo, an artist who participated in our Analog program in 2013. The program started in January 2017, and is a four-week, court mandated program where young people participate in visual storytelling workshops that Shaun designs and leads. Then, after young people complete the court mandated program, there are various ways to stay involved in Recess and the arts at large, through paid pathways to leadership and peer mentorship. We have some young people who have been with us since the program began.

Our Session program is what really put us on the map, and it began with Corin Hewitt and Moly McFadden's *Double Room* when we first launched in 2009. For Session, an artist takes over the main space, and we stay open to the public from the day they move in to the day they move out. All of those projects involve the public in some way or another. We really lean on our artists to think about who that public is, and how we can think expansively and inclusively about what a creative public looks and feels like. What does engagement or participation mean for them in the context of their practice? For some, it's direct participation and for others, it's more performative. For some, it's about creating a dynamic and changing visual environment. Artists have really run the gamut in terms of how they're defining those two things.

Another program we do is Analog, which is our most durational program. It's a yearlong, online residency where an artist charts an increment or metric of their labor over the course of a year, and we encourage them to think critically about how artists work and how that work is measured and quantified. We have a Critical Writing Program that conditions a writer to produce a text, in the context of both the Session program and the Analog program. For the Critical Writing Program, we are not looking for a review or a commentary, but rather, a critical exploration that just dovetails with the themes at play in the artist projects.

AK

Do you pay artists?

AFW

Yes—Recess is W.A.G.E.-certified, and I think our ethos is in line with W.A.G.E. in thinking about the value of artwork. But it's specifically thinking about this idea of what studio time is, and what audience time is, where they overlap. If our job as an organization is to create relationships between artists and audiences, how can we be legible and transparent? How do we make transparent what it is that an artist does? Some of our projects have been very serious, and some of them have been a little bit more tongue-in-cheek. Our first Analog resident was trying to decide if she was going to enroll in the MFA sculpture program at Yale. It presented a really challenging cultural and financial question for her. She decided to go, but in order to attend, she had a \$1,000 debt that she had to remit. The honorarium for the project was not coincidentally \$1,000. It was meant as a very real way to solve this practical problem that the artist had, but to also render that challenge, that problem, more legible to audiences. So, for the full two years that she was enrolled in Yale, she posted the balance in her personal checking account, in a really beautifully designed calendar interface. Last year, an artist named Morgan Bassichis posted a bunch of to-do lists every week, thinking about the tangible, intangible, and aspirational items on our to-do lists.

AK

When you conceived of Recess, did you also begin with all of these different projects and branches? Or did it really start with Session?

AFW

It started with Session.

AK

And was it initially called Session, or was it called Recess?

AFW

In the beginning, Session was Recess. Again, it goes back to thinking what we did as a project, and Recess was the project.

AK

How did you come up with the name?

AFW

We were thinking of play, playfulness, and experimentation.

AK

And a break in the middle of the day...

AFW

Yes—this idea of a break, and the spatial reference of a remove or a step back from a dominant market, or more dominant dialogue, or more dominant public. It was also the time of the recession, so we were thinking about Recess economically, too. Now, in the context of the Assembly program, it's interesting because it also has legal implications—a court will have a recess.

AK

And then, from there, you created Session. Were you calling it Session then?

AFW

No. It was just that other projects started happening, and you have to name these projects, but they all fall under the umbrella of Recess. I think Session probably started being a term that we used around 2010, which was also the time that we were working with Simone Leigh on a series called *Be Black, Baby*, which never really had a program umbrella but was an important series for us that we did for about a year. Simone is still involved and is a close friend and an advisor.

TN

How do you develop which artists you're going to work with? Are there specific criteria, or do artists propose these projects?

AFW

I would say that for an artist, the gateway to Recess is working with us in the context of a Session. We have an annual Open Call for artists, and our selection committee is a rotating panel of artists, curators, and cultural producers that look through all of those applications and decide which is the best expression of our mission. Once artists have participated in Session, it opens them up to participation in other Recess programs and also, to be totally honest, opens up their network of artists and peers to other participation.

For example, the Analog program has often been populated by artists who have participated either in Session or in public programming as part of Session. We met Morgan Bassichis through a program with Malik Gaines and Alex Segade, and Morgan started conversations with our Program Director at the time, which then developed into an Analog project. So, the more discretionary programs are Analog and Assembly. Recess staff tends to handpick those artists. We handpick the Assembly artist because there's such a specific set of skills that's required of that program. The Critical Writing Program is mostly filled by the Session and Analog artists. So, artists who are participating in those programs nominate potential Writing Fellows that Recess then vets and chooses them.

AK

Do you feel like you are gravitating towards artists who are at a particular moment in their careers, where Recess can provide a functional space or particular opportunity? Or are there some criteria that you're looking for with regard to the kind of artist that you work with?

AFW

We're looking for artists for whom this opportunity would be useful. That's often an artist who is earlier in their career and needs time to explore and think about the connections that they can build with their public and colleagues. For us, we are thinking, what are the ways in which a more process-based platform can be helpful?

It's also very useful for artists who are more mid-career and thinking, "I've been doing this one thing this whole time, and I'm really curious about trying this other thing. But I can't go into a commercial gallery show and just try this other thing because it's not what's expected of me, and that's not what

my gallerist wants me to do.” One of the things that we’ve been cognizant of recently is that as Recess grows, so does our population of artists. For the Session program, for example, we used to get lots and lots of applications of mixed levels of rigor. Now we’re getting slightly fewer applications, but they’re much more competitive, and the artists who are applying are in a slightly more mature stage of their career. That’s not anything that we did intentionally. But it’s something we’re thinking quite actively about simply because we didn’t do it on purpose, and we see it happening. Why is this happening? Is this a good thing? Do we need to be more intentional about who we’re reaching out to?

AK

Can you talk more about making an artist’s process visible to the public?

AFW

One thing that I think changes with a slightly more mid-career artist is that they’re actually less accustomed to making things. An artist who has been in a group show at a museum, or maybe has had gallery representation, or just generally has had some public presence in traditional exhibition venues is usually working with art handlers. They might make the painting, or sculpture, or performance, but they often direct where things should be, or what color.

When an artist comes to Recess, we try to be really clear about the fact that the way Recess works is that we’re turning over the space entirely, which means you can do whatever you want with it, granted that you can return it in the same that you found it. But it also means that we’re asking you to really do a majority of the work. That doesn’t mean that they personally have to do it, but if they want someone else to do it, they need to communicate that to us. These expectations have to be part of the discussion from the beginning, and we will facilitate finding them support and labor. But I think it’s a different way of working for an artist to be in complete control of their work. Whereas emerging artists often don’t know any other way of working.

AK

What does Recess offer the artists as part of Session in terms of budget? How do you facilitate these projects?

GEE WESLEY

Each artist receives an honorarium of \$1500, as well as full coverage for the production and programming costs. We also provide administrative support and communications and marketing support. Everything we do at Recess is

customizable for the artist: There are artists who want to be in control, and to almost be the institution for a period of time, and they'll negotiate how much marketing we'll do, or something similar. Then, there are artists who are really interested in having the structure of the institutional apparatus and social capital that comes with a project like Recess, in which case the institutional frame will be much more present. But yes, we cover the costs of the project completely.

AK

Do you have a ceiling for those budgets? That number could balloon very quickly, so when you say that you cover everything, can artists come in and literally do whatever they want? How do you create those parameters?

AFW

At the proposal stage, we invite them to propose whatever they want. The general rule that we present is that you'll never be disqualified from getting an interview, which is the final stage of our application process, if your number is too high. But we do communicate in the guidelines and in the FAQs that the projects tend to be supported between \$3000 and \$8000, and that we do not cover living expenses.

GW

People will propose things that are much higher.

AK

What's the time period for the \$1500 honorarium?

GW

They receive the honorarium at the conclusion of the project. About two months prior to the start of the project the artist will receive the first installment of their stipend, and they'll receive the second installment the first day of the project. And then about three weeks into their Session, they'll receive the final installment.

AK

How long is each Session?

GW

Two months, generally.

AK

Are you working with them before that two-month period to prepare for what they'll do?

GW

I've worked with Session since September, and in that period of time, artists have had completely different expectations and working styles. There was an artist who organized this massive exhibition and project and performance series at The Kitchen and had lots of curatorial experience and felt very confident taking control of the administrative responsibilities and needs, whereas some artists have more requests from us in terms of administrative assistance, or reaching out to vendors and such.

AK

So, you'll help them connect those dots.

GW

Yes, and Allison has maybe found a happy medium of negotiating those two poles that I'm yet to arrive at.

AK

Could there be a point where the artist might start to treat you like an artist assistant, and you get absorbed into the project in that way?

GW

I do think that I've been able to communicate the ways in which it's most helpful for us to participate in the projects. We provide as much initial support as we can, and that's usually a better option for our time. But recently, we had a lot of the Assembly participants who have gone through both the court-mandated cycle as well as the Assembly program who are being incorporated into Session with projects such as providing installation support, contributing to onsite programming, and facilitating different ongoing events and public engagement features of each Session project. And again, that's really instrumental and I think one of the most beneficial aspects of working here.

AK

When you select artists, is there an expectation that, because we are in kind of a post-studio landscape, that artists aren't always making things in their studio? Is there always an expectation that production be visible? I remember when we went and visited Sondra Perry during her Recess residency. She was sitting at her desk editing a video. There wasn't anything to see necessarily. How important is it to you that there be a kind of product that's legible, which is maybe more of a commercial gallery expectation?

GW

Certain projects that are proposed in the open call period don't properly consider how the public will be able to engage in the absence of an artist, or in the absence of any kind of activation of the project. If a project hinges on ten people participating at any particular time, realistically, that may not be the best model. Conversely, projects where others will have no way of engaging or entering the work are also not the best model.

AK

Is there an expectation that there will be an exhibition at the end?

AFW

No. There is definitely an expectation that there will be something in the space that ideally one can visually engage in the entire time. But there's no requirement that an artist make something, and certainly, it's not required to be an exhibition. Typically for Session we have a public program or reception halfway through to mark some work that is in progress. Then, we have another event at the end, to mark the continued iteration of whatever that thing is. In the same way, we usually have the staff put together a draft of the press release and then give it to the Session artist with feedback. We also usually have a piece of ephemera that we help design. All of those things are highly customizable. One of the things that has definitely been part of Recess since the very beginning is that, unlike in a museum or in a larger institutional

structure, where you ask an artist to shrink their practice to fit an institutional model, Recess is designed with the hope that it will always stretch to fit an artist's practice.

AK

Interesting—the boundaries and the walls are actually permeable, in some ways.

AFW

Absolutely. We try to make that as clear as possible to our selection panelists and to our artists who are applying. The reason Recess staff doesn't weigh in at all in that process is so that we can be really impartial and transparent about what we expect from this program. Once a project is accepted, it means that it checks the boxes of engagement and thinks expansively and radically about publics and access and all of these things that are important to us.

AK

Do you think of it as a residency?
Or is there a distinction for you between a residency and what you do?

GW

I don't think of it as a residency. I do think that one of the things that is valuable about Recess is that it produces unique outcomes and it exists somewhere between the space of project-based organizations and institutions funding the completion of an emerging project. It's kind of like a public studio space where the artist has an opportunity to work through something important to them. It's also a presentation space for the public.

AFW

Yes, I agree. I think Recess thrives on the elemental space between pedagogical models. All of our programs straddle a version of a more typical format, like an expedition platform or study space, for instance. The space in between those is maybe what Session occupies. If there is a classroom and there is an exhibition space, maybe the space in between is what Assembly occupies, and likewise if there is URL and there's IRL, the Analog program is somewhere in between as well. We're thinking about the possibilities in that uncharted territory and in areas that have some precedent to their left and right, but are squarely in a more nebulous space.

AK

Have there been any frustrations or roadblocks along the way for you? Sometimes those can be really productive moments.

AFW

There are plenty of financial moments like that. There have been many moments when we wonder about sustainability. Will this continue to be possible? But I would say a sort of pivot moment for me, right before Gee got here, was that starting about four years ago it seemed like all of the projects that our artists were realizing were much more explicitly socially engaged than they had been previously.

There were artists making work about race and gender, and issues like mass incarceration and gun violence and police presence—all of these really timely and important issues that were showing up again and again in all of our programs. At a certain point, it started to feel a little bit disingenuous making work about these issues, in the context of a space that prides itself on being expansive and inclusive, in terms of the community that it builds, and to make this work without reaching out and recruiting folks who are directly touched by those issues.

The Assembly program was the first iteration of that impulse to develop a thoughtful approach to mass incarceration. Over and over again we were having artists present really dynamic work addressing the relationships between citizens and police. How do we actually get involved in this issue in a way that touches court involved and prison-involved populations?

TN

Was the phenomenon of artists presenting that type of work a conscious decision? Do you think socially engaged issues became part of the selection process? In other words, was everything leading up to Assembly in some way?

AFW

That's a really good question. I think what was intentional and what has always been intentional, since the beginning, was being a platform for a bigger set of voices. If an artist has been historically sidelined because of either race, gender, politics, ethnicity, or immigration status, that they would find a space here. Not only would they be welcome here, and not only would this be their

space, but this would also be the space for their people, and that their people would become our people, and that there would be, hopefully, a really organic meeting place in Recess that could be generative. That was intentional. Welcoming those folks to be the primary voices and core of this organization. And I think, as that became known, it became obvious through the artists who were participating.

TN

Instituted, one could say.

AFW

Exactly. I think those artists tend to be the artists making more work about the issues that are directly confronting their lived realities. I think it was a conscious effort, yes. Assembly wasn't the sort of logical conclusion of that, until it was.

AK

Because you do so many things as an organization, who do you think of as your peers? Do you feel like you have peers? Or do you feel like they are in diverse registers?

AFW

Historically, our peers have been other arts organizations. I think we felt most akin to other folks thinking expansively and creatively in the field. For example, the Laundromat Project is another organization that we look to that does really rigorous, creative work with a lot of critical content, but that's also deeply engaged in their community and their surroundings. I think that we look to spaces that are older than us, like Artists Space and some of the originals or alternative spaces and folks that are still around.

But within the last two years, since Assembly started, we have had to look outside of the arts a little bit to find examples of cross-disciplinary work. It still feels really important to identify as an arts organization. And even though we do a lot of social justice work in the context of Assembly, and in the context of the other programs as well, it feels more radical to do it from an arts corner and to be really honest about the fact that this is not a community center. This is not a school. This isn't a mental health facility. These are all of the things that we're not experts in.

We have to be really conscious about how we treat those partners when we meet them. When we need a therapist, or a social worker, or an attorney we know where to look, and we know who to tap for that. But we really hone

in on what we do, which is to engage in a process of creative reimagination, and that's what artists are always doing in partnership with their audience. When that audience is court-involved youth, or someone walking out on the street, or a curator is coming for a studio visit, then all of those partners are collaborating on this larger project.

AK

To backtrack a little bit, we started talking about the number of employees that you have but we didn't get into what everybody does. I'm curious how the positions at Recess have grown or evolved.

AFW

I think I dodged that question because we're in this process of restructuring a little bit. Historically, we've always operated pretty horizontally. Everybody at Recess has a seat at the table and is very much involved in making decisions about what we do best, how we do it, and ways to make it sustainable. I think that if you were to draw a traditional organizational chart of how Recess looks, there would be the board and the ED, and then three top level positions. There's Gee's position as Program Director, Jackie Chang is Director of Engagement, and Jessica Lynne was in charge of Development and Communications.

AK

Is the engagement position based at Assembly? Or is that a whole other team of people?

AFW

Yes. We created the engagement position a little after we started Assembly, and with the goal of having the position function as an overarching way of thinking about all of our programs, placing engagement at the center of what we do. The reality of Assembly almost two years later is that there's so much need in that program that it just sucks up anyone's time who is there. Before Jackie started, I was at Assembly two days a week, and they were absolutely my favorite two days. The program is growing at a rapid rate and there were so many meetings and liaising with the DA's Office and court partners that Jackie's role in Engagement was quickly just focused on Assembly.

What we're looking to do in the context of this next hiring process is to have a coordinator or program manager for Assembly and think about

engagement and strategic advancement. Then we'll fill in the development and communications work that happens to make these things run and to be able to tell our story effectively.

In the context of this thinking, one thing that we've been talking about is that the more traditional organizational chart doesn't quite work for us. We've been thinking of Recess staffing more like a solar system model, where programming and programming support are the central anchors, and the positions at Recess all sort of orbit around those. Every employee of Recess is doing something to further the program and something to further its support. Everybody is doing some element of fundraising and some element of programming. Everybody still has titles.

AK

What prompted the move to your current location in Brooklyn and the growth that you're experiencing right now?

AFW

Space is a big one. We had outgrown Assembly's space, for sure. Our rent is more expensive, but not that much more, and now we have more than five times the amount of space.

AK

Is it different for you now having an office space that's separated from the physical project space?

AFW

It's much more productive. We had to sort of pry Gee away from the front desk because it's hard to work down there. He's really good at welcoming our audience, but if he's down there five days a week, it's really hard to get work done. We're thinking about dividing our time between upstairs and downstairs duties.

AK

I was going to ask if that changes the interface of the institution because there's also the flipside. In the same way that the artist's process is made public, there's also the administrative aspects that are important. I remember talking to Jenny Jaskey at The Artist's Institute and she reflected on how as Director, it was important that she be there with her laptop and that people see her in the space.

AFW

I don't know if that's important to me. I think that the transparency of the organization is super important to me, as is the fact that anybody can come

up here and hang with us, and that we have three artists that have studio space up here that share the conference room with us. We have our Form 990 on the Recess home page, so there's a lot of transparency in how we operate, but also a lot of fluidity.

AK

Can you tell us about the studio space?

AFW

It's just for this year, but for Assembly more so. It's a subsidized studio space for a year for five artists who share space with us.

AK

Does that go through you? Do they have to apply for it?

AFW

We put out a very informal open call to artists who have worked with us before and went through a list of folks who were interested on a first come, first served basis, which has been super nice. It's been great having those folks here.

AK

To go back to the question of transparency, with W.A.G.E., that's a given.

AFW

To be a nonprofit, 990s are public. I think that folks tend to forget that, as a public charity, you have to be public. Your operations have to be public as well. But I also feel like the ability to actually take the administration out of the project space makes for a little bit more ownership of the artists who are working there to really own this space. I think we still maintain the porousness throughout the building, and we also have the wood shop in the basement now.

AK

Do you have three floors?

AFW

The basement is the basement, but it's finished so wet work can get done down there.

AK

It seems like there are a lot of artists moving to this neighborhood, too, and it seems like an area that a lot of people are putting energy into.

AFW

We wanted a place where artists are and feel comfortable. We wanted a place where we could actively expand the creative community to include our neighbors, which includes people who are living in public housing.

AK

But in some respects, do you feel like you're gentrifiers?

AFW

We were very conscious about not locating to a place where we thought we would just be displacing residents. This neighborhood is very industrial; there's a lot of big warehouse space.

AK

So was 356 Mission in Los Angeles.

AFW

That's true.

AK

It's complicated.

AFW

There's like no way to not. And I think being really honest and acknowledging that is the first and most important step.

AK

I don't mean to sound accusatory. It's just so complicated to even know where to land and how to land responsibly.

AFW

Right. There's no way to land responsibly. I think it's a question of how you mitigate those damages. And it's our hope that because we're here and not in a neighborhood like Bed Stuy for instance, where people are living and setting up small businesses and have been there for years, it will be different. We're not going to displace the Nitra Yeshiva, for instance, which is way bigger than us. The hope is that we come and that we form partnerships to enrich the experience of the folks living and working here.

One of the new initiatives for the Assembly program for 2019 is that we won't just be offering diversion programs to court-involved youth, but diversion programs for what were common community touch points, which include residents, business owners, and NYPD. We're thinking about offering a very similar curriculum that we offer to 18 to 24-year-olds, but a curriculum

that diverts those folks away from policy involvement and arrest, so that there's shared accountability around these issues and this neighborhood.

AK

I love the solar system metaphor for the structure of the organization and the way you all work with each other. Does the organization need you to exist?

AFW

I really hope not.

AK

Continuing that train of thought, where do you see Recess going? Would you want Recess to exist in 20 years with or without your involvement? What would that look like?

AFW

It definitely is my sincere hope that Recess already is much bigger and more dynamic than just me. I don't think Recess was actually a thing until it was at least one more person than myself, and that continues to be the case. I think with each new person that we bring in, whether artist, staff, or board, the organization shifts shape and priorities. I don't think the mission changes, but the expression of the mission changes with the staff and other folks that are involved.

One of the conversations that I have a lot, both with staff members here but also with board members and colleagues and friends is that as long as I'm white, which is always, and Executive Director, which I hope will not be always, Recess will always be a white institution. That's a big factor in thinking about the future of Recess because most of the work we do is aligned with decolonization. I don't love the term decolonization, but that is the ethos or closest language to our mission. I'm thinking about leadership and the future of the organization and moving away from centering whiteness. I obviously can't change the fact that I'm white, but I can change my role within the organization. I think I'm a really good leader for Recess now, but I do envision future leaders and a shift in the landscape so that leadership can look and feel differently.
