

Conversation with
AMY SADAQ,
Institute of
Contemporary Art,
University of
Pennsylvania

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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Amy Sadao is the Director of
the Institute of Contemporary
Art, University of Pennsylvania in
Philadelphia, PA.

With Alex Klein, Tausif Noor,
and Xinyi Wan

ALEX KLEIN

Last time we spoke, we discussed this idea of institutionalizing as a form of protection and that's something I hope we can pick up again. Under your tenure as director, what do you think an institute means for us now? We can unpack it in a lot of different ways, but it seemed exciting to really think critically about the terminology we use as we're thinking about a new strategic plan, a new staff body here, and as your vision as a director has become more legible to the public.

AMY SADAQ

What is the difference in vocabulary between an institute and an institution? I really couldn't make a distinction, but I do think that institute seems like it has a more scientific connotation. For me, "institute" speaks more to experiments and research than an institution. But I am stuck on this idea that this museum is an institution and that that is part of what we provide, and that's wonderful, you know? Even when I worked for Visual Aids for the Arts, which is a very small organization that was 20-years-old when I began there. It felt very much like a grassroots organization. It was very provisional because there were not a lot of resources, but it was certainly an institution that had been created by people in the past, and had its 501(c)3 status.

But the idea of institutionalizing: you are really just putting down this marker in the ground that says “This is what this organization does.” Whether it has a physical home or not, it has a history, and it has the resources for a future in that its purpose or mission, requires it to plan for the future and to expand and be responsive.

I’m not troubled by the idea of working in or maintaining institutions because I think that institutions have an important role to play in maintaining a level of equity or inclusion — at least pointing towards the potential of equity in the U.S. because so much of everything else is being dismantled.

AK

Right.

AS

Or never existed to begin with. I think those of us with similar progressive politics, sometimes think “Oh the institution is the man.” Like, “We’re going to take down the institution.” I’m just not that anarchist, honestly. I work very hard to not have an entirely negative connotation for institutions and what I have been spending my life working in and directing. I think especially in this moment today, generally speaking, we should double down on institutions too. Institutions are going to be protections against, like you said, the privatization of public goods, and everything that is currently public. Or artists, or ideas. I mean the things that are not institutionalized can be blown away. Institutions can simply mean rootedness. You go below the surface where the soil is all loose, just a little bit into the ground. So when the wind blows or there’s a tornado, you can hang in there. And you might lose everything, your resources, your people, but the institutions and the framework might just be there. That’s what all good organizations do. And just in terms of ideas, part of what is transferred generation to generation is whether institutions only think of themselves as buildings and spaces, or places. An institution can be a good community, or a body of knowledge, or a set of ideals. In a larger sense, I think an institution is an idea that is shared or agreed upon.

I do think it’s about history, and it’s about acknowledging work that has been done — just literally labor workers, and people who founded and maintain this Institute of Contemporary Art. We move forward on their legacy, and on their generosity, certainly those people who’ve endowed programs and positions, and ideas that they believed enough that they wanted to see go on forever and ever.

AK

Is ICA an institution? And if so, is institutionality really about this? In a sense there are both pros and cons to institutionalization.

AS

It's an interesting question about art centers, and cultural organizations, and arts spaces, and museums, and where the line around the institutionalization happens. I mean institutionalization generally is seen as something negative, and it's not exactly true. The idea of building institution, laying groundwork is really important. The idea of historicizing and institutionalizing forms of knowledge, alternative histories, just like stories and ghosts. That's important too. To use the language of the moment, "fight and build." Build is building institutions; they can be temporary institutions, they can be underfunded institutions, they can be institutions that are just ideas. That's what I think an institution is; it's an idea that we share. I mean that's why we didn't want to say society. We want to acknowledge there is an idea that society is an institution or a shared, sharing life, sharing space, sharing a nation, sharing rights is an institution. I am constantly challenged by the ideas of what constitutes an institution, and ideas shifting thematically to what it is to be institutionalized.

AK

Of course, that also connects to one's personal position or ethics of an institution. We all have lives, and things we have outside of our work. At what point is your self-identification intertwined with an institutional position, and at what point, do you operate inside and outside, or do you bring the outside in?

AS

Those of us who are used to codes and switching codes, those of us who are used to double consciousness I think can adapt to the quadruple consciousness that's written to the ideological. And say that "so now I'm wearing my institutional hat," now I am wearing my "Amy, partner of Tom Devaney hat," now I'm wearing whatever, but it's not about how I feel about it, it's also about how I'm perceived.

TAUSIF NOOR

We've done a lot of research on the mission statements of various institutions and our own previous mission statements at ICA. Looking at a lot of them,

you see some things recurring:
"to preserve, to promote, to
protect." Now that you've been
here for a few years, what do
you think about the ICA's mission
statement and has that changed?

AS

The ICA mission statement which is that we "believe in the power of art and artists to inform and inspire," and that we are "free for all to engage with the art of our time" — it feels to me like it's attempting to define what contemporary art is and draw boundaries around what ICA might focus on. The first sentence, it is very similar to other contemporary arts institutions, in the U.S. It feels real 90s to me, and I don't know why that is. But I think that there are certain phrases and ideas that seem to get repeated a lot at ICA, that I feel very comfortable using to describe what we do. The ideas of the unknown or the unexpected.

In terms of which artist and why this artist, or not that artist, we're looking at artists, or ideas, and in to a degree, simply works that are not as yet explored. To quote Alex, "art that's not yet digested by the market, or by art history" to ways that we can say things get established or historicized. So, we're looking there. It's not that we're looking at artists who are emerging, or that they're "new," because they could have been working for 40 years. But certainly, artists who haven't been getting the kind of critical attention or, the curatorial devotion and platform for being able to be seen, that ICA can provide and that other museums can provide. That's what we are free to do because we are non-collecting, right? That's also what we are free to do I think because we're part of a university. And it's what we're free to do because we're in Philadelphia. Our geographic location on the eastern seaboard with its connection to the Northeast, also defines what we're free to do because we're in Philadelphia with encyclopedic museums surrounding us. We don't have to create a new historic narrative every 10 years, and then weave in current artists into that and then put them into our collection and every now and then show our collection. We can kind of go a little bit more erratically and a little more eccentrically based on who's curating here. I think we're pretty clear that that's what drives ICA.

That we're very curator driven and that we are very artist focused still maintains I think the ideas of things shaped like Dan Dietrich's Inchworm Fund. It lays out what we have identified in this time – what was special about the Suzanne Delehanty years, and the Judith Tannenbaum years of working with Paul Thek and working with Agnes Martin. Why was this very small arts museum so good at helping important artists? And we can call them that now, right? Important artists take different tracks. Or why were we useful

to their progression, or their careers, or their understanding, or the public's understanding of their work? What we settled on really was that there was time, and trust built between the artist and the curator.

That's what Dan Dietrich's gift, the Inchworm Fund provides, which is three to four years of research, or relationship building between a curator and an artist or artists, and some ideas, or some questions which hopefully, but not necessarily, will turn into an exhibition.

XINYI WAN

I guess maybe backtracking, it would be nice to hear if you could put yourself in your own shoes before you came here. Looking outside at the ICA, what was it that made you come here?

AS

Well, you know, it's a museum without a collection. Having spent many, many years in New York, these are not unfamiliar things if you're in contemporary museum settings. I guess the idea that this institute is rooted in a city and inside an academic, educational institution it looked to me a lot like artist-run spaces in its programming. It had less expected presentations and choices, yet it had the resources of a larger institution. In particular, I was very aware as I'm sure that audiences from outside of our area are, of the robust and deep publishing that ICA does. So, if you couldn't come to every single show that ICA mounted, if you're not here three times a year for the seasonal changeovers, or to attend public events, you would certainly get these beautiful catalogs. Many museums produce extraordinary shows and public events and yet the historicization, or publication, or distribution of those works and shows and time, is like a little pamphlet vs. an actual publication that's researched and beautifully designed, and that has paid attention to giving writers and artists time to digest

what they have done — that's very important. Having come from a non-collecting institution and really a non-exhibiting institution in a lot of ways, publication was our mode of making history and of extending the ideas that artists are exploring. The programming at ICA was certainly more interesting than the museums that I was more familiar with in New York City. It seemed like it was elevating the kind of important frontline curatorial work that smaller artist-run spaces, or time-limited spaces, were doing, but with the resources — publications, a larger show, international things — that a museum could do.

AK

You know, it always looks like one thing from the outside than it does from the inside. I'm curious to know how you felt when you got here. Under any new director, there's a sense of "Okay, we want to be in dialogue with what's come before and forge new territory." Was it like that for you?

AS

Yes. I think that what struck me from inside, and spending more time in Philadelphia and certainly the difference that Philadelphia is a smaller city, and then just understanding the landscape, the physical landscape of the city and where people go to experience culture, or to be around each other socially, is not generally speaking, here, in West Philadelphia, on the Penn campus. You've got Broad Street in a certain way for theater... does that exist in Philadelphia for visual art?

Then you have the Parkway for the bigger museums. I think a lot of people — Philadelphians and people from greater Philadelphia area, they don't think like, "I'm going to the Penn campus,"

because they think that's just for Penn students, or Penn people. I think a lot of people who work at Penn don't think, "I'm going to stick around at my workplace after work, or go back there with my family on a weekend." We're not the natural site for people to say, "I want to think about something differently. I want to experience something creative, or beautiful, or disturbing," or whatever it is that we're looking for when we go to the movies, or read poetry, or go to hear live music, or whatever it is. So that was interesting. I'm just aware that attendance was small here. But I was also aware I guess as I came inside, that that had not necessarily been prioritized here.

Being able to, as we say, issue invitations to join in the real work it takes, and what it meant specifically to Penn, and what it meant specifically to Philadelphia. That has been part of what my tenure has been about. So, my own investigations, or my own, research into this institution and the expansion of this institution, or the usefulness of this institution, have been about matching this extremely new or different, or unknown programming with audiences both who identify, or who almost identify as contemporary art people, as well as people who don't currently identify as contemporary art patrons.

I think the people who identify negatively, who say "Contemporary art is not for me," that is a really difficult group of people to invite, and you have to consider what resources you have and what you don't. I mean, what a great

challenge. I'm excited if you can get people to change their minds –and be excited about changing their minds.

AK

I'm really curious to hear you talk about growth because that's something we've spoken a lot about with our colleagues. Our staff has grown since you've been here, our audience has grown since you've been here. There's been talk about the building growing.

AS

Growth, without thought behind it, is just cancer. You know? The idea we're just going to keep growing is ridiculous. Why should we measure success by that? I certainly don't want to measure success or importance either by just doubling our audience, or those kinds of quantitative measures.

There's a lot of pressure right now on artists and cultural producers and organizations to adopt the same measures of success that for-profits and capital demand. So, return on investment, and show us the data matrix, and data mine, and here's me shaking my head. That doesn't translate well for, either the ephemeral nature of what we are presenting, or also the true value of what culture and art is, right? Those are things that accrue over time.

AK

Right.

AS

Those are things that change. They shouldn't be measured in the same way. I don't want to open us up to a kind of progression success matrix. I think we have expanded, we've gotten more resources, we've gotten more people and, in a lot of ways that was coming to ICA and seeing how much it was doing and that it was unsustainable with the amount of people that we had.

I wanted to keep the strength of our programmatic curatorial program, and then, additionally, you know, build another department: one that can help issue invitations and also create an interpretive layer for people who are not completely comfortable with contemporary art yet. That was something that you know had to happen in addition. It wasn't like splitting off or reorganizing, the team that we already had in place, and the commitments of resources that we already had in place. It's an expensive process. I mean, it just takes a lot of resources to produce things well. To produce things at the level that we want

to.

What is our mission with regard to artists? It's pretty simple. They have to have the best museum experience they've ever had. They have to walk out of here saying, "This was the best museum experience I've ever had" or "Wow! I don't know how any other museum is going to match this, now I know what to expect. Now I know how one should be partnered with an institution as the artist."

TN

Set the bar.

AS

Exactly. And so that's what we do at every step of the way, right?

AK

Scale-wise, does it feel like we've realized what you were initially hoping for the institution? Or does it still feel like there's some room to change?

AS

Of course, there's room to change. There's room to get better. Our public engagement department is only two years old so we're still in an evaluative mode. While I reject a return on investment-type data driven matrix, I think that we as a museum have to find evaluative measures that make sense to us, that reflect our goals. That reflect artists' goals, and that help us see when we've done things better or worse, so that we can do them differently. It's a strange idea quite honestly because we do transform the institution continually. There are not as many models for how to do things as we might think.

We've been publishing books for fifty years, but under this current team, every book feels brand new. We've been mounting exhibitions and every exhibition is completely different.

AK

Totally

AS

You yourself Alex have developed and managed and produced, I don't know, 400 public events? But they're all a little different. And you know some things. You've created some rules. And you've created some ways to evaluate them, or to predict what might happen, but it changes. Part of what keeps it exciting

here for us who get to work here, but hopefully for the artists and audiences that we work with, is that we just keep changing it. We just keep changing the form. We just like keep manipulating and turning it inside out, shaking it all out, building it again. We're interested in that kind of structural investigation or format investigation. That said, I still think that we could find some equally expansive or unusual evaluation methods.

AK

Just before we leave scale entirely — because some people we talked to had like very strict ideas about how far is too far to grow — I'm just curious if for you there is that ICA will only ever get so big because we're not trying to be say ICA Boston, which is now building a new building across the river and now has a collection.

AS

Yeas, I think so. Once you start looking into something like a collection and once you start taking on the ambitions of a city or an area, like a neighborhood that needs development and you start adding things on like event spaces that can be rented. Or just if your supporters, and patrons, and partners are so hard up for you to get big. If you can't define yourself with enough integrity to not grow, then you're probably going to just keep sprawling and growing. I'm using it pejoratively because I think that that's a little like a developer's dream. It's not necessarily an artist's dream. Some of the boundaries that define how big ICA may become, or that we are non-collecting. Let's not be collecting. Not under my tenure. No way.

We have just over 10,000 square feet of gallery space in this building. So, my idea, when I came in and really started to see the limitations of this building were to think about what it would be like to expand particularly, to house and better share live art and to address some of our visitor flow that's a little strange in our galleries and in our building. But I realize, we really have a lot more room to grow programmatically and so, let's keep doing what we can in the physical footprint until we are like really pushing out of the walls of this building so intensely that it becomes necessary. Let's make sure that there are people in the galleries and at events continuously. Nobody wants to change... you know, you need to have the opportunities to come to a gallery as Ingrid Schaffner would say, on a Tuesday and be the only one there. That is an important part. I think that that's why we keep the hours that we so people

go to museums in the morning or early afternoon when they want to come and kind of be by themselves with their art work.

XW

You were talking about how you don't want the museum to be data driven, and we had talked about evaluations. When you say evaluations do you believe there is an objective standard for that, or is it more individualized?

AS

It's pretty individualized but maybe you could dip in and out and if 60 percent of the people you talk to said, "I liked this place and I would go back," "This place made me think this way," "This place made me feel this way," or "I felt welcome there even if they said I don't understand everything I saw, but I felt welcome there." If 60 to 75 percent of the people said that, then it would feel like, "Hey, we're doing a good job of inviting people, and of welcoming people," you know? It's really knowing what questions you want to ask right?

Like: "Is this important to you? Do we have to put a number on it? Do we have to say is this worth \$25? Is this worth an hour of your time? How do you value ICA? Do you put it on a scale? I don't know. So, how would we evaluate? Impact is just how I would think about it. And that people feel welcome. For me that's really important. Beyond the importance of our curatorial excellence, and the scholarship, and our relationship with artists, the great challenge for me in contemporary art is to invite more people.

I'm a little bit of a proselytizer that way. I live for contemporary art and to be around artists, and poets, and musicians, and to just, be blown off my feet and walk away from something I don't understand, or really feeling that I dislike something and then having to spend a lot of time grappling with it. That's a huge part of why I get up in the morning every day. I assume that everybody should also have those experiences, but I understand that there are a lot of barriers to that. Some of those are simply institutional. Some of those have nothing to do with this place, but have a lot of things to do with other structural inequities that have kept poor people, women, trans people, gay people, black people, brown people, yellow people out of certain institutions. So, I would like to change that, and I think that's kind of a goal of everyone who works at ICA.

TN

Definitely

AS

I think certainly most of the artists, if not all of the artists that we show, they would also like their work to be seen by non-traditional art audiences. What could that mean for a city that art could be the place where we could all get together?

TN

Something I think is really interesting about our name — the Institute of Contemporary Art — is that there's one in London, there's one in L.A., there's one in Boston. What do you think is our relationship to other ICAs? And what sets it apart from those institutions?

AS

I think your project looks at our name as a provocation, right? I'm dodging it by saying like, "Oh, it's just the name." There's a million MCA's or a million MOCA's, right? It's just what was decided to call a non-collecting institution. But that in itself, being the non-collecting institution, or being not an artist-run space, but being an institution, building a little building out of bricks and steel or whatever, and then saying this is going to be the mission to show contemporary or to show evolving new works that, you know, that's what an ICA is, right?

TN

Definitely

AS

Because even a MOCA or an MCA has a collection.

XW

ICA Boston has a collection.

AS

There's a lot of reasons around why collections get formed, with history museums, and so, to cleave to a mission of being non-collecting and to embrace the freedom that that allows you, is important. The idea that things come in and live here for four months and then leave — those are different conditions, and if you're going to put something on permanent display, but that also, you know, as Anthony Elms has pointed out, when we've been troubled by loans, or you know, condition requirements that exceed our

excellent conditions. Maybe those loans, maybe those objects are too big, or they're too established, or they're too well known, or they're too valued, or whatever it is, for them to be shown at ICA. Which is a good bracket.

AK

Right.

AS

We should not necessarily hang a Van Gogh show, or even hang a big Warhol show.

XW

It's okay to have restrictions.

AS

Exactly. We have to work in a different register, a different vein. And that's great. This is the way I approach budgets too. It's like, money is the rules of the game, we just play with them and then you see how far you can push things right?

TN

Right.

AK

We know all about that.

TN

That's what's interesting about the curatorial direction that we take. Not just those limitations, but also the freedom that we have. We have fairly short cycles. How can we really make an impact?

Who is it impacting? I think one other thing that sets us apart from other ICAs is that we are also connected to the university.

AS

Yes.

TN

As you said before, that allows for resources, and it allows for research. But I also think it is another kind of interesting challenge for us. What is our relationship to that institution, an institution that goes back almost hundreds of years? How do you see our relationship to the university?

AS

In multiple ways. We are now responsible to, and we're in the same crisis of mission – the same kind of public reckoning that private educational institutions are in. Even though ICA itself, doesn't have admission, we're part of the University of Pennsylvania, and all private universities are being called to task with questions like

How can you build these kinds of endowments and not support the cities you're in with taxes? How can you charge this enormous sum of money even if you give a lot of scholarships and welcome students of different incomes? Are you not replicating experiences for the elites? It's not unlike the reckoning that many museums are facing right now as well. Right?

AK

Right.

AS

You welcome the public, the public throw stuff at your door, and tells you that you have been treating them poorly. Great. Do you know what should happen? But we are part of the university and so we take on the civic and cultural responsibilities and problems that the university faces.

TN

Right.

AS

There's an interesting relationship between what we understand as research and scholarship that we do as museum people with living artists versus what our colleagues who are professors and academics do. And that's not even the difference between what an engineer and what a cancer researcher does. But the ideas about what constitutes research and what constitutes academic work, is really interesting. Or what constitutes knowledge production? And

how do you share that or teach that or historicize any of that? There's certainly wonderful models for thinking about exhibitions and for thinking about artists-in-residence and artists' works as pedagogical tools and as modes of learning and modes of knowledge production. It's exciting to be part of that, but you know, more often than not, we're at odds in some ways with more traditional forms of what the academy quantifies as knowledge production.

AK

Right. But that does point to this idea of an institute being another generator of knowledge or research. That we are producing research and we're producing...

AS

Well, and you're sort of producing pedagogy. You know like it's a way of thinking, it's a way of learning, it's a way of teaching that is through the presentation and consideration of artists' works, you know? Or that's like guided by like whatever an artist wants to do, or a curator and artist want to do.

AK

Right. I'm reminded of when we were talking with Dan Byers the other day, one of the things that he emphasized was this idea that the Carpenter Center is a place where art can be art for art's sake. So often, especially in these larger universities, artists are instrumentalized for other things. They're used for research projects in other areas, in other departments, or for the purpose of... you can even say art history. So the institute could be a place for artists and curators where there's a kind of a safety that art can be art.

AS

Because we're non-curricular –I think that that's true. I constantly grapple

with this idea of not containing art or not instrumentalizing it, or just simply not requiring art to do more than it's supposed to do, and we still have not defined what it is to do. If you want to be really Zen about it or something. In a time when so many public institutions and cultural institutions are being called to task for their lack of representation, for their tone-deaf relationships with the cities that they're in, or the neighborhoods that they claim to serve, or their complete blind spots about their own histories, or about their current programs...

AK

I guess what I was getting at with that is that there is something that we can teach out of this space too. There is another way of thinking through a kind of a pedagogic perspective or a perspective on art production.

AS

I like the idea that the institute is a place of learning, and not just a place of learning, but it's a place of constructing pedagogy.

AK

The work we've been doing with RAW for instance, their Academie, has allowed us to consider: what would it mean for there to be different kinds of pedagogic models? What would it mean for there to be another way of thinking or centering Pan-African art discourse as the center of a pedagogic practice?

AS

Those are the kinds of things that make me reflect back maybe not just in counter distinction to maybe the model for the art history department, but is there a way of forming another kind of model?

TN

Right.

AS

I mean a museum should be that kind of space, right? If we take “institute” up on this teaching place and the place of learning and a place of exploration or of different types of thinking, it’s completely apt to name a contemporary museum because it doesn’t have to be an academy. It doesn’t have to be education capital E. It sounds super corporate or something... it’s such a dumb word to use... like lifelong learning, but I mean, what else is it? What else do you call the idea that you can formulate ideas and ask big questions and then get like about 16 different answers and decide and none of them work? And that makes us excited – that we could do that together.

TN

I always see it as maybe not necessarily a counter, but an experimentation hub. If it is the case that our larger institutions, whether they be academies, museums, or whatever, have a history of being exclusionary, of being white supremacist, of being etcetera, then how can the institute be a counter to these things?

AS

Undo that. Undo that.

AK

And propose another model.

TN

And propose another model. How is the experience of being on the Penn campus different from being at the ICA? How is the experience of being at the ICA different from being at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and so on?

AS

Those are some of the kinds of things that I feel like I’m saying over and over again that aren’t our mission per se, but we’re the public space on a private

campus.

TN

Right.

AS

Right? I mean like we're a place where Penn students are going to interact with people who they're not going to interact with in their classroom. And when you're not talking to Penn, when you're talking to the publics, we're a place that forms partnerships in depth and over time with different neighborhoods, or communities in Philadelphia, and that we are the contemporary art space that serves Philadelphia. Where everything's free, and where Penn is outward facing, and that learning doesn't have tuition.

The ideas around public school, or something are interesting to me to think about what public spaces or what a public institution is, and how people use it serves people or publics, and how people change that institution by their expectation of it. This idea of ownership is very interesting to me and that's how when I think about visitors, I just generally want to change who thinks they own ICA.

AK

Yes

AS

When Linda Harris, our long-time guard comes in and says, "I'm home." She's talking to the museum – "You're my home." What if we all kind of felt that way? Not just people who work here obviously, but other people who really felt: "That's my museum. That's my ICA." That's the kind of ownership that you want people to feel. What do we have to do to engender that feeling from people? It's the same expectations that we provide for artists. Of course they deserve to have this experience. And for anybody just to walk away from ICA and say, "Well, of course every museum should make me feel the way ICA made me feel." Of course, it should. Nothing less than that. That's one of the little mission things that I keep repeating. This is for Penn students who come from all different backgrounds, right? For undergraduates to graduate from an Ivy League institution, and not feel like they can walk into any museum in the world, then they haven't gotten an Ivy League education. We want especially for first generation, low income students, and non-traditional students to feel like they, through their experience with ICA, that they can roll into any cultural institution or symphony space and anything and think: "This is for me, and that's for me, and that's for me, and that's for me. This whole world of culture, and art and ideas – it's mine and I belong here." And so, you know we have to overcome a lot of the social and class barriers that cultural institutions

engender.

AK

How do you think you do that?

AS

You touch every single part of it. Part of it is you stay open to people contesting your vision for the museum. I think your program work that responds to different histories; you think about your tone and the way you look and feel. I think what we do is that we take things for granted, like the idea that nobody's going to try and touch the work. That's not true. There are certain rules that we accept around art and in museums that not everybody does. And so are those people not welcome here? If they make a mistake, should they get kicked out of the museum? Or should they feel like they are in danger of getting kicked out of the museum? Well, we've just set them back. They're never going to walk into a museum for the next five years, ten years... ever.

XW

Thinking about how to make people feel comfortable.

AS

Yes. And literally open up a little bit more of the museum, right? But make the museum a little more transparent.

AK

Right.

TN

I always liked the way, when we have discussions about this, how you've phrased it as about making it not just inclusive, but welcoming. Extending that invitation. One of the things that I find really interesting about the ICA is that it's done a really good job of mixing local Philadelphia artists and international artists, because we are in an international city, we're on an international campus. Have you found that difficult at all?

AS

Oh, you always disappoint artists. You never serve enough of the local artists in any capacity that all artists will be like, "Oh great!"

Every artist thinks you can do more.

I think that is true and I think we all feel that too. We feel the limits of being able to put together six to 10 shows a year because you end up saying no to more wonderful ideas, and wonderful artists, and wonderful opportunities for research than you do get to say yes, right? That's the inevitability of just being able to do six to 10 projects a year. That's hard to explain over and over again. But, just as you were saying, it's just welcoming Philadelphia and an international audience.

AK

Another thing that I always think about and one of the things that's been driving the project is also thinking: "Well, what are the barriers that we don't even see?" That's the big question. What are the walls that we are building that we're not even aware of?

AS

Exactly. And then, what are the things that can't or won't be changed?

AK

Right.

AS

I will maintain that art requires something of the viewer that entertainment doesn't. If the residents from 40th to 50th Streets all say, "You know what we'd really like is just a bunch of big TVs and you guys could stream free cable," I can't do that. For me that's not contemporary art. That's not a cultural experience that I want to use the resources for the ICA to do. That seems more like entertainment, which is great, everybody deserves entertainment as well, but there are some distinctions.

But back to your original question, absolutely, identifying our own blind spots –trying to just be worthy of people who are different, and people who have different perspectives, having their input. Being trustworthy enough that they would give us their input: the way they create the ticketing, the way that you use the Internet, whatever it is. Some of it I don't think is like that big a deal. I don't think there's these huge cultural barriers. People are sometimes like, "Why do I have to wear shoes in the museum? It's not like an Asian

household, where you take your shoes off. You know? If everybody takes their shoes off in the museums, would we have more East Asian visitors? No, not necessarily.

AS

I think there's this myth of this massive cultural rift. Where there are cultures of people who just expect to run up and grab sculptures and things. There are tons of people who are like, "Don't tell my kid not to touch something." Or that someone in a uniform telling you not to touch something is not a dire threat. It's really interesting. I think more than race and ethnicity, it just seems class-based, and that seems like one of the big untouched differences in stratification in our country.

AK

Absolutely.

AS

We just don't know how to talk about class at all, and we won't admit that there's a difference and that class divisions, which go across racial or ethnic groups, are one of the big things affecting us.

How far can we go? How far can we go toward really making the ICA an essential part of lots of really poor people's lives? When you're poor you need a lot of other things besides culture, but you do need culture.

TN

The idea that there's a general public is a myth.

AS

No. Exactly.

TN

There is no such thing as a general public, but you go from that premise and work around that — that there is no general public, but, there are publics, and an institution can serve many publics. Who are they? How do you serve them? What can you give them first, and what can they get out of it?

AK

And do you serve different publics in different ways?

AS

Yes, exactly. And at different times. That's what we're trying to do. There's certain requirements for an audience. You have to be curious. You have to be willing to like or to learn to get comfortable with the unfamiliar and we can do that first by just showing a film, and you can come eat a Popsicle on our terrace and watch a film, or come for something like a Gather or party where, you know, a group, that, you know, like all the people you roller skate with are already going to be at ICA or something. Just go with the roller skaters.

AK

I think we've asked this before but what for you have been some of the biggest frustrations in the work that you've been achieving the last few years and maybe looking toward the future? What roadblocks have you hit up against?

AS

Right now, the thing that makes me enraged basically, is museums and other institutions including educational institutions just tokenizing people of color and queer people by code words of diversity, inclusion, and equity, which spell DIE. Which are just bullshit. It's a new version of multiculturalism. And I think in the context of museums and cultural institutions and in private universities, it's particularly repugnant in that the history of elitism in all of those institutions is so strong. You're creating "local flavor" or you're making like a multicultural experience for the elite so they're comfortable being around people who don't look like them.

TN

Diversity is for white people.

AS

Yes. So, that's really tough. I think the good intentions, you know, you can only put up with it for so long; then you just get really tired of it. I think that ICA has to be smarter than that, and ICA is smarter than that, and I think that it really matters, particularly with artists and thinkers who are interested in embracing ideas of difference to come into an institution that enacts that kind

of philosophy of difference. We're not interested in glossing over it by saying like, "Oh yeah, you know, we're super diverse."

The contemporary art world is a strange, strange place. The market and the prices and the auctions and just, you know, the professionalization of artists, and of art-making is really distressing. Most of our patrons, or many of them are really intense collectors and they enable artists to keep making work by collecting their work.

AK

It's true.

AS

The market is always going exist, but this professionalization of art-making is very disturbing to me. And not that I want artists to starve in any way, but the unwillingness to take more risks or to really do stuff that's not going to be object-based, that's not going to be collectible, that's not going to be documentable, or just too weird to categorize: too strange, too new, too unruly. That's a bummer.

I really love seeing art, and art that is truly strange. The concerns around what's happening in higher education in the U.S. is really a big deal for me because I'm a big proponent of learning, and learning, and learning? I'm an institutionalized person. I feel very comfortable on college campuses generally speaking. But the division, and the idea that... that we're working more and more inside a bubble is very distressing. How do we create openings and redistribute these resources of this extraordinary institution, to serve a wider range of people in our neighborhood is important to me.

AK

Speaking of distributing resources, one thing that hasn't come up is the recent W.A.G.E. certification, and I would love for us to just talk a little bit about it.

AS

I just came from a museum directors conference and I was asked at the last minute to talk a little bit about being the first W.A.G.E.-certified museum in a Professional Issues Committee, which was packed. There were something like 80 museum directors. No one was expecting that many people to show up. I'm very proud of us for doing the work to get to W.A.G.E. certification. That's certainly something that was driven by the curatorial team for years now, which is simply like what is fair remuneration for everyone who works with us.

We are, in the end, the institution. We're all getting paychecks. Let's make

sure that the people that are the least empowered, generally speaking the independents and the artists, are getting as fair remuneration as we can make. We're happy to do that and we're happy to share that and make that a little transparent with the understanding that most institutions want to do this too. All of our colleagues want this and so all of the institutions do too. Part of the process was really ICA speaking with W.A.G.E. and particularly our Chief Curator, Anthony Elms, who was asked by W.A.G.E. to come in and just talk with them about why museums weren't joining W.A.G.E. The people who were setting up the guidelines at W.A.G.E. didn't understand how museums make decisions about their budgets or how they categorize budgets.

I think the idea of justice and equity starts at home. We're trying to do that here inside the museum, and just trying to raise a level of ethics and expectations around the work that we do. And if we have to do less, that's okay.

AK

Who do you think of as our peers? I know that we have this kind of expansive model that's always growing and contracting so they're almost like more conceptual peers in a way. Who for you are our aspirational peers?

AS

I think of a place like the Hammer Museum or the Walker Art Center, a museum that has the resources to present live art, and theater works and has a library, and has public reading groups, and outdoor space, and everything. I also think of something much smaller like Participant Inc. in New York and the very tight community of artists in downtown. People who are really devoted that Lia Gangitano has brought together. The feeling of like, whenever you're there, there's just not enough time to be there even though you're just packed into this little space.

I also think that, of the experiences that I've had where I just really feel high when I'm leaving, like an Ars Nova Concert where you're just like "Wow!" You're inside a beautiful space with extraordinary music and it can only happen because Ars Nova did it. Also the way that sometimes when you're in a smaller group, like at a book launch or something, listening to what the poet reads. We can be that smaller publishing house too — we could be that special Ugly Duckling Presse-type place, to create something that then people carry with them that you go back to every year and you have to read that book again.

AK
Yes

AS

It's like an accordion, where we would expand and contract, and expand and contract. I love that we have Elixir downstairs now, a very social interstitial space, similar to other hangout spaces. The fact that if you want to take a break from your laptop and walk into our galleries, that's a lot different from working in a coffee shop.

AK

That in and of itself has changed the overall experience I think for the general public.

AS

I think it has made it a little more comfortable and more of like a sticky situation, because you can just hang out here and you can just do what you want to do, like play on your laptop or read a magazine or something, instead of what we want you to do which is to walk through the exhibitions. There's a nice mix. I love it when we are opening the doors and there's people lined up to get inside the museum. I think that's amazing. I'm excited by that.
