

Conversation with  
ANDREW PERCHUK,  
Getty Research  
Institute

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I is for

Institute

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What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,  
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber  
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute  
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ANDREW PERCHUK,  
Getty Research Institute

Andrew Perchuk is the Acting  
Director of the Getty Research  
Institute in Los Angeles, CA.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

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ALEX KLEIN

You've had many different roles that have evolved over the years in the institute. What is your current role at the Getty Research Institute [GRI], and how long have you been there?

ANDREW PERCHUK

Well, in one capacity or another I've been here for 18 years (even though technically two of those years I was a fellow-in-residence, which the Getty doesn't count in terms of being employed at the Getty.) I've had a few different roles at the Getty. I started as the first head of the contemporary programs and research department, which I did for three years. And then I became an assistant director, and then in 2009, the Deputy Director, and earlier this year the Acting Director.

AK

What year was the GRI founded?

AP

The Getty's a little complicated because there was the museum and there was a library, which is one part of what became the Research Institute much later. But then the Getty, in its modern incarnation, was started after the settlement of J. Paul Getty's will, which I believe was 1982. It really got started in 1983–84.

AK

It's interesting that you're an institute housed within a center.

AP

We're actually not a center. The center is just the name of the building complex. All of the Getty programs fall under the umbrella of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

AK

So the institute is not part of a center; it's part of a trust.

AP

Correct. It is the J. Paul Getty Trust, which handles a lot of the administrative functions for the Getty as a whole, which comprises the Getty Research Institute, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Getty Conservation Institute.

AK

What were the founding principles of the Institute? Why did they decide that they wanted to have this scholarly center adjacent to the museum?

AP

When the will was settled, Harold Williams, who was the president of the Getty, and his top lieutenants embarked on a listening tour both nationally and internationally to determine what was lacking in the field. One of the concerns that became most evident was the need for a research institute. Obviously, we are pre-dated by CASVA [Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts] at the National Gallery, but there still are not very many significant research institutes in art history in this country.

AK

Right.

AP

The Getty Research Institute has become by far the largest of them.

AK

Incredible. Was it always the idea that the GRI would have a collection?

AP

Yes. The scope and focus of that collection was not always clear-cut, and

different directors have interpreted it differently. I think one of the reasons I was hired to head the contemporary department was because the GRI had collected very little contemporary materials before the early 2000s. And creating the contemporary department was, of course, a spur not only to scholarship and other programs, but also to building our collections. There was always the agreed-upon notion that rare primary source materials were necessary for a serious art history research institute.

AK

Can you remind me what year the contemporary section was founded?

AP

2003.

AK

That's relatively recent.

AP

The whole Getty is pretty recent. In its current iteration, it's only been a concern since the 1980s. The Center opened in 1997–98. Before that, the Getty was more notional. It included the small museum—what is now the Getty Villa—and the other programs were spread out in office buildings in Santa Monica and Marina del Rey. At one point the Getty comprised seven different institutes, some of which were merged to create the Research Institute as it is now.

AK

How interesting. Before everything was joined together in the building that you're in now, there were these different facets under the trust that didn't necessarily interact with each other much. Is that correct or is that maybe reading too much into it?

AP

It's a little hard for me to say because I wasn't yet employed at the Getty during those early years.

AK

Of course.

AP

But, yes, there was a department that has become our scholars program—a program for the arts and humanities. Unlike now, that was very separate from the library or from the special collections, which is the rare material.

TAUSIF NOOR

It was previously known as the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, right? And then that latter part was dropped from the name?

AP

It was The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities. When it was decided that the new Brentwood campus would be known as The Getty Center, the name was changed to The Getty Research Institute.

AK

Do you remember what year that happened?

AP

It was before my time, but it happened sometime during the period when the Getty Center was designed and built; everything was merged up on the hill in 1998.

AK

I'm curious how these different entities work together or don't work together now that they are under the same architectural framework. Is there much interaction between those different sections of the Trust?

AP

Yes. One of the biggest challenges I've experienced was taking what were disparate entities and merging them into one institute. There had been a Getty Information Institute, which was really one of the leaders in early digital projects within art history, and that was very separate from the scholars and

curatorial departments when I first came in. Since then we have developed global initiatives, such as the Getty Vocabularies, which are a system of rather technical metadata thesauri, which the Getty was producing, but not using in its own holdings. We've really worked diligently to merge all of that into one cohesive institute. I'd say it's our most important single accomplishment over the last 15 years.

AK

Interesting. And do you have much dialogue with the museum?

AP

We do. We collaborate pretty frequently. Pacific Standard Time (PST) has been an enormous source of collaboration among all of the Getty programs. We've held GRI exhibitions in galleries at the Getty Museum in both Pacific Standard Time exhibitions. We have collaborated on joint conferences, events, and even acquisitions, but we are very much separate institutions.

AK

I'm curious about how that works with regard to collecting. The museum has a collection and the GRI has a collection. Where are the distinctions made and how do you frame the things that you bring into your collection as opposed to what maybe would go into the museum?

AP

In general, at the GRI we collect not particularly or primarily for exhibition value, but for research value. Our mission is to support research in all areas of art history. We collect everything from archaeological photography to contemporary art. The museum has a very defined collection of European art from the medieval period up to 1900, and then photography, which is not limited to that period. At the GRI, we don't collect paintings or sculpture—only works on paper. Really the only overlap between the Museum and the Research Institute's collections is in photography, and there we quite often share acquisitions. When we acquired the Robert Mapplethorpe archive, for instance, the museum took what they considered the best of the editioned prints, and we took everything else. This included the material around his correspondence, his workbooks, his contact sheets, and his uneditioned work — that would be a pretty standard acquisition process at the GRI.

AK

When you came in to oversee the contemporary section, how was that defined within the parameters of the institution? Are there dates that you ascribed to the contemporary? How was that discussed?

AP

It was pretty informal, but in general, contemporary was considered, in reasonably academic terms of the time, as post–World War II, even though given my own interests and others', we did acquire quite a bit from the earlier period, that is the first half of the 20th century, as well.

AK

What is the process for collections? Is there a plan? Are there things that you're particularly going after? How does it all work?

AP

We have ten curators. Each one of them has very well-defined collecting areas and particular areas of interest, and many times they work together. We have a collection development council, which is an internal audience, where curators present their proposed acquisitions. Then, after lively discussion, we generally take a vote. We also have a very active and generous support council to whom we present potential acquisitions twice a year.

AK

You mentioned there are ten curators. How many people in total work at the GRI?

AP

About 200, including full-time and project-based, staff.

AK

Incredible. And are the collections all housed on site or are they also off-site?

AP

We have eight vaults on site, and then we have what we call our annex, which is another 100,000 square foot storage facility in Valencia near CalArts.

AK

Got it. I was always told that if there was ever a major catastrophe to run to the Getty because it would be the safest place in the city to end up.

AP

Fortunately, that notion has never yet been tested, but that's what our security administrators reassure us.

AK

I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about access to the collections and how you understand the facilitation of scholarship and research to the public. This is a two-fold question: how does the outside come to you and what does the GRI itself produce?

AP

We are a public library so we're open to anybody, though there are varying levels of access. But we try to make access as easy as possible for people. We have about 6,000 active readers who use the collection on a regular basis. What we have come to realize is that there's a much larger audience that isn't able to come to Los Angeles. Over the last 10 or 12 years, we've instituted a major digitization project. We have been digitizing both rare material and books in the public domain and made them freely accessible on our website and on what's called the Getty Research Portal. This invaluable resource now holds 150,000 downloadable complete texts. We endeavor to disseminate our materials in many different ways to make them accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

Sometimes we really try to curate online access with a more scholarly presentation format. For example, our first online exhibition on ancient Palmyra included some of the earliest photographs of Palmyra and among the earliest prints. On the other hand, from our extraordinary collection of photographs of medieval churches in Italy by a photographer named Max

Hutzel, we just made 80,000 photographs available online as a resource without any curatorial apparatus around it.

AK

The Getty is such a vast resource and I'm really so impressed by how much you have. What for you are the weaknesses in your collection, and as Acting Director, where are you actively looking to fill holes in the collection?

AP

When the Research Institute was started, it was really seen as a place for outside scholars to come and do their research, and not a place that generated research. That has changed pretty dramatically over the last 15 to 20 years, so that at any given time, we have 15 to 18 significant research projects in progress internally that involve staff, and almost always, outside scholars as well. These projects are always based to some degree in our collections.

AK

Interesting. Is that part of your scholars and PhD fellowship programs?

AP

The Scholar's Program is a separate research department at the GRI, wherein we house 50 to 60 scholars for the residential program every year.

AK

Oh, incredible.

AP

We also support another 100 or so researchers on shorter term library research grants. We award grants for anywhere from a couple of days to two weeks for people who need to study specific materials in the archives and who need some financial assistance to do so.

AK

Is there something in particular under your directorship that you have felt needs focus? Art

history's a big topic in its many dispensations and it's really impressive that you aim for both breadth and depth.

AP

The GRI was at one time a pretty Eurocentric institute, and I think the most significant collecting policy change in the last 15 years is that we are now much more representative of a global art history. Fifteen years ago, we had books on Chinese art or Indian art, but only in Western languages. We've made a concerted effort, moved a lot of resources, and raised funds so that we could equally collect in Chinese, Japanese, and Hindi. We've also greatly expanded the scope of our rare materials, in particular the Asian and Latin American collections; all while endeavoring to also fill lacunae in other collecting areas.

AK

Has that also resulted in hiring new staff members who have specialties in those areas?

AP

Absolutely.

AK

Speaking of funding and resources, where does all the money come from? Is it all from the Getty Trust and an endowment? You also mentioned having to fundraise. How does it work?

AP

Yes. The majority of our budget comes from the Getty endowment, but we have been very successful at obtaining grants and developing other forms of fundraising. We have a very active GRI Council that helps us build our collections as well with their generous monetary and in-kind gifts.

AK

Do you have a board that advises you? Or is it mostly the support council that helps with the finances?

AP

The Getty has a board of trustees, which supports large initiatives like Pacific Standard Time, but does not assist with most individual GRI acquisitions. Because there's one board for the whole Getty, the Research Institute does not have a separate board. We do, however, have an advisory committee to guide us to stay on mission with the direction of our projects, policies, and initiatives, but it does not financially contribute. And, as I mentioned, we have our dedicated support council that does financially contribute.

AK

I'm curious also to hear about your artists-in-residence every year and how you have artists embedded within the GRI.

AP

One of the more exciting, but more difficult challenges that we face every year is in choosing the artists, because all of our resident scholars and fellows live and work together. We own an apartment building with 34 apartments, which are nearly always full to capacity, so there are 34 people at any given time in residence with us. The artist-in-residence has to enjoy or be open to living with usually 33 scholars or curators, which is not necessarily the easiest thing for an artist. On top of which, we're not really set up for an artist to have a private working studio space.

AK

Right.

AP

We have a little studio, which is lovely with an amazing view of the ocean. But the artists need a more viable work space and their own support network to do ambitious work. We don't have those resources or connections. It's really an intricate challenge. We've been getting better and better at it, I think, but it's still a difficult process to find the right person. I think some artists would have liked more support than we're offering or have offered. We are not in the position, nor do we think it's something that we should be part of, to help artists get exhibitions or meet with collectors while they're in residence with us.

AK

Would you say you cater to more research-based artists? How do you go about selecting the artists

and what is the criteria for that?

AP

That's a good question. We have an annual theme. We try to find an artist who relates to, or even helps define, that. I would say in general we tend to cater to more established artists because they have the infrastructure to make living in L.A. more successful. Although in the future if we were able to have greater resources, I would love to have the opportunity to work with emerging artists.

AK

I wanted to switch over to PST to think a bit about some of the projects that you've overseen at the Getty that have really become a very important part of the Los Angeles art scene, but also how Los Angeles is regarded in the rest of the world. Can you talk a little bit about how Pacific Standard Time originated?

AP

Pacific Standard Time is certainly the most organic project that I've ever been involved in. What originally brought me to Los Angeles, and to the Getty, was the research for my dissertation on artists working in Los Angeles in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. At the time it was very difficult because the material wasn't available. I think I wrote quite a bit about *Art and Technology at LACMA, 1967–1971*. Everybody there was incredibly kind, and, in fact, one of the curators actually let me use part of her office to do research. But they had no archive or research facility. They brought out a big box which turned out to be fantastic research material but it said: "Art and Technology, Box Six of Six." So I asked, "Well, where are boxes one through five?" And they replied, "Oh, we have no idea." That was much better than some other places. For example, I went to one university gallery where they said, "The file cabinet with 1960s material is over there, and if you find things that are valuable for you, you should probably just take them home with you." Which I didn't. When I got to the Getty, I talked to Joan Weinstein, who was the Deputy Director of the Getty Foundation. I told her I felt I had sort of an intellectual and civic responsibility to do something to bring attention to this under-represented period of Los Angeles art history. We hired an archivist to determine if any of the materials still existed or whether they were gone forever. Luckily a lot of it still existed in small archives and private files; it was just inaccessible.

Over the next few years—from 2003 to about 2005 or 2006—through

the Foundation, the Getty made grants to make this postwar archival material accessible. Around 2006, we started seeing what had been uncovered, how extraordinary it was, and how it really changed the story of art in Southern California. We thought we couldn't just be satisfied to keep this only as a scholarly project.

AK  
Right.

AP

We felt it should have a more public face. Joan and I met with the directors of LACMA, MOCA, and the Hammer and said, "Would that be of interest to you to do something focusing on California?" At first, we thought a group of exhibitions wouldn't work because everybody would want to exhibit exactly the same works. But luckily, it turned out that the venues each had project proposals that were radically different.

We started meeting with a lot of other institutions, many that had resources that were newly discovered or newly accessible, and pretty much everybody wanted to be a part of it. We thought that it might include 10 or 15 institutions and exhibitions when we started, and we would have been happy with that. It sort of took on a momentum of its own, and we ended up with 68 exhibitions. Before moving to L.A., I lived my whole life in New York, and institutions there are not historically very collegial nor collaborative, let's say. But here it was really amazing. I chaired a curatorial group that met frequently for three years. And people were amazing. They actually shared checklists. MOCA actually changed the date range of their exhibition so that it wouldn't conflict with the Orange County Museum exhibition. That's pretty unheard of. A lot of what I learned was—and I think it worked even better with *PST: LAILA*—how not to have just 68 individual projects, but how to make it into one overall project. And that was a real learning experience.

AK  
I know it spread beyond the physical boundaries of the Los Angeles city limits. How far out did you go and how did you find some of these smaller venues? Were they all on your radar before? How did that all come together?

AP

What we call Los Angeles isn't really the City of Los Angeles, as you know well from having lived here. We thought both of what the ecology would be and

also where stronger institutions were located. We chose a southern point of San Diego and a northern point of Santa Barbara, sort of defining Southern California even though it's still somewhat inexact. And then obviously, west to east, from the beach out to Palm Springs. Each of those places is a day trip from Los Angeles, even though the traffic would make it not the most pleasant day trip. It's very important that there is quite a bit of sensitivity among many people in Southern California about being subsumed under Los Angeles. We wanted to be sensitive to that and not just subsume everybody under the category of "Los Angeles artists," some of whom have never lived in Los Angeles.

AK

Sure, right. So, it's more Southern California.

AP

Yes, and there were certainly places I had not known beforehand, that I discovered. We left it completely open for anyone to apply to be a part of it. We formed a review committee. We were, I think, pretty open-minded in the sense that there were some proposals that really had very little to do with art in Southern California. In this most recent edition, *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, there were some project proposals that had very little to do with Latinx culture or Latin America. And those, obviously, were not accepted. But, still, it was very much a ground-up rather than a top-down organic process in the sense that it wasn't exclusively a Getty project. I can imagine a very different project that might have had a very strong voice saying, "We need to do this," or "This is what's missing," but it wasn't that at all.

AK

Right.

AP

I think a fair criticism of Pacific Standard Time is that a lot of important artists and materials were not included. We addressed some of that by also welcoming the commercial galleries. In the first PST, because a lot of these institutions had been working on these ideas for so long, but the fact that it is so difficult to get funding for thematic art exhibitions these days as opposed to solo shows, the result was that it was very heavy on group and thematic exhibitions and very light on one-artist exhibitions. There were 110 gallery shows in the first *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945-1980*, and about 100 in *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*.

AK

Did you put out a call to people to submit proposals?

AP

Yes.

AK

With the vastness of such a project temporally and geographically, who is the intended audience for PST?

AP

Well, we hoped very much to create an entirely new experience for people. So, for regular museum-goers, we hoped to inspire them to visit a museum that they hadn't been to before. We actually had funding to measure statistics for the first time. We learned that 60 percent of the people who visited a museum had done so for the first time as part of PST. We had implemented an outreach that had never been attempted before, to reach those who don't regularly go to museums. That was particularly successful in the second Pacific Standard Time. Lastly, and this was not true when I first moved to Los Angeles, we tried to motivate visitors to travel nationally and internationally to Los Angeles. It is hard to imagine nowadays, but it certainly was the case in the past, that you might hear about a great show at MOCA, or wherever, and ask New Yorkers and they would say, "Oh, no, of course I didn't go out to L.A."

AK

Right, right. But I think PST was something that consolidated a lot of energy, and people felt like they needed to come and experience it and be part of it. Personally, it feels like PST has contributed to the reemergence of L.A. within the greater art world.

AP

It definitely helped. At first it took us a little bit by surprise in the sense that suddenly all these boards of major museums around the world wanted to come, expecting VIP treatment, and we didn't have that structure in place. For the second PST, we arranged VIP tours in advance, and we developed a system that allowed for unexpected or last minute VIPs to have curator-led

private tours.

AK

One thing to remark upon is how it has also inspired other cities not just to look at Los Angeles, but to look deeper at their own histories. I know that the TERRA Foundation sponsorship of the art and design exhibition cycle that's going on in Chicago right now is very much indebted to seeing how PST really brought that energy to the city.

AP

One of the most dramatic shifts in the art world in the last 20 years is that the centrality of New York is no longer taken as a given. It has opened a lot of space, I think, for other cities, other regions, to emerge.

AK

But it's also made it a bigger field to try to get a handle on.

AP

It surely has.

AK

Can you talk a little bit about the thinking behind the second PST and what the future of PST is?

AP

Sure. The second one grew out of the first in many ways. The first PST was considered enough of a success that the city and the Getty board certainly wanted it to continue and maybe become a permanent part of L.A.'s ecology. The first PST had eight exhibitions that featured either Mexican-American or Chicano art. At that time, it was by far the largest concentration that had ever been exhibited publicly in one place. It was really revelatory for people looking at this history, both from the perspective of the influence and history of Chicano/Mexican-American art, and to build on that, but also to look at L.A.'s history, which began, of course, as a Latin-American city. Yet, those connections were very understudied, unlike in Miami and Houston, which

have done a better job historically of connecting to Latin America. L.A.'s art world didn't have a strong record in connecting to those histories. So, it really seemed like an opportunity.

AK

Right. And because we don't have time to really get into it in depth, I'm just curious—what are your plans now going forward? Is there going to be another PST?

AP

There will indeed. I think it will be in 2024, but there's a chance that it might be in 2023.

AK

Are you already planning a theme for it?

AP

No. We're still meeting, and we'll be meeting again this fall with many of the local institutions to develop a new theme.

AK

That's very exciting. I'm assuming also that this is also in tandem with what you were just talking about, thinking more broadly about what Southern California is in conversation with the broader industries and dialogues that were also sparked by that first PST. I think many of those exhibitions keep on giving and creating new projects. They've spawned many other exhibitions and bodies of work.

AP

The last point I would like to make is that I think there were two important lessons from the model of PST. One was the importance of separating the research from the implementation. Every project was required to propose a two-year research phase which, as you know, most contemporary curators

don't have the luxury of realizing.

AK

Exactly.

AP

The funding must be separate, too. With funding from the Getty, you receive a grant for the research phase, and then two years later you apply for a three-year implementation. What's really crucial about that is that the projects change radically as the research develops. And that's okay.

AK

Right.

AP

Back in my days as a curator—obviously, I applied for a lot of grants—and if you apply for a grant for a Tseng Kwong Chi exhibition and you get it, you really have to do a Tseng Kwong Chi exhibition. With the PST grants, the nice part is that people are allowed, and even encouraged, to change their projects during the research phase. You might say, for example, "I thought that this group of five artists was the right one, but it's not. The exhibition will be two of the original and these other three," shifting to adapt to whatever direction the research takes you.

The second lesson is to encourage publications. There were 40 publications for the first PST and about 50 for the second. As you phrased it so well—the reason these projects *keep on giving* is that people now have books and documentation to begin research for their own future projects.

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