

Conversation with
ANTHONY HUBERMAN,
CCA Wattis Institute for
Contemporary Arts

I is for

Institute

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

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

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
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08.16.18

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Anthony Huberman is the
Director of the CCA Wattis
Institute for Contemporary Arts
in San Francisco.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

We're really excited to talk with you about what you do at CCA Wattis and to hear a little bit about how your previous work at The Artist's Institute informs what you do and where you are now. Let's begin with the history of the Wattis. How was it founded and how does that connect to what it is today?

ANTHONY HUBERMAN

The Wattis was founded in 1998, within the context of an art and design school, the California College of the Arts (CCA), which was then known as the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC). The Wattis was originally called the Institute of Exhibitions and Public Programming. It was renamed the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in 2002, after a generous gift from the local philanthropist Phyllis Wattis. Larry Rinder, who was the Dean of Fine Arts at CCA in 1998, initiated the project.

Part of the initial idea was for CCA to absorb another organization that had been running since the early 1980s in San Francisco called Capp Street Project. It is one of the earliest and longest running artist-in-residence programs in the country, where an artist was invited to spend three or four months in San Francisco to develop a project for exhibition. Ann Hatch, the founder of Capp Street Project, is a local philanthropist and is also on the board of CCA. By 1998, she had been running it for 15 years and was eager for a larger institution to take it over. And so CCA absorbed the full Capp Street archive, which is now held at the school's library, and the Wattis has continued to host an artist in residence every year since then.

AK

What year did you join Wattis?

AH

In 2013.

AK

How many directors had there been before you?

AH

Larry wasn't actually here all that long. He went to the Whitney in 2000, just a couple years after the Wattis was founded. Ralph Rugoff was the director from 2000–2006, and then Jens Hoffman from 2006–2012. Ralph also hired Matthew Higgs, who was a curator at the Wattis from 2001 to 2004. I hired Jamie Stevens as curator, who was here from 2014 to 2016, and then Kim Nguyen, and she has been our curator since 2017.

AK

Are you in the original location or do you have a new building?

AH

There is a new building. The Wattis was initially located within the school's main building, but by 2010 or so, it had become clear that the Wattis had established a strong national and international visibility, and I think CCA recognized that it was a very effective ambassador for the school and thought the Wattis needed a space that could be more public-facing, so that it could be an even better bridge between CCA and the professional art community.

And so CCA bought a building on Kansas street, a few blocks away from its San Francisco campus, and the Wattis moved into its own stand-alone building, with a big window façade that made it more public and better able to connect to a broader community. The first exhibition in the new building opened in early 2013, and I joined the Wattis during the summer of that year.

AK

You really got to put your stamp on the new building.

AH

I did! I think there had only been two shows by the time I arrived.

AK

When did the name change?
When did it just become
Institute?

AH

It was in 2002. It was four years after it was founded.

AK

Do you know why they changed
the name?

AH

Phyllis Wattis—her name is all over this town—was one of the most prominent, generous, and enlightened philanthropists in San Francisco and had lived here for many years. She was an incredibly engaged and also an incredibly adventurous philanthropist. Sadly, I never met her, as she passed away in 2002, at the age of 97. I've heard many beautiful stories about her though! For example, during board meetings at SFMOMA, after the curators presented the upcoming program at the museum, she would be the one who would raise her arm and say something like, "This all sounds great, but when are we going to do the complicated, difficult, experimental stuff?"

AK

Amazing.

AH

That's what she was about. It was a natural fit that she would want to support what is essentially the hub for contemporary art in San Francisco. SFMOMA obviously shows contemporary art as well, as part of its larger exhibition program, as does the Berkeley Art Museum, but the Wattis Institute is the only place in San Francisco that is fully and exclusively dedicated to contemporary art and to future-facing art and ideas. It's what we do all day, every day, all year, all the time.

AK

And where does the funding
come from?

AH

From a wide range of sources. Of course, we get some operational and infrastructural support from CCA.

AK

Is your building free for you?

AH

It's not free in the sense that CCA invests quite a lot in the Wattis. The school covers the costs associated with the building, such as the mortgage, the utilities, the security, the insurance, etc. It provides administrative support via its accounting, facilities, IT, marketing, and development departments, and it covers a majority of the costs related to staff salaries and health benefits.

AK

Do you have to fundraise for your program?

AH

Yes, I have to raise the funds for everything we do at the Wattis. Exhibitions, publications, travel, storage, advertising, etc.

AK

Is that made up from grants and private sources?

AH

From all of the above: grants, private sources, limited editions, etc.

AK

Do you have a board?

AH

We do not have a board. The school has a board, but we do not have a separate board.

AK

Do you have autonomy with regard to your program?

AH

We do! I report directly to the President of the school.

AK

So, what is your relationship to the school? Is there a mandate that you have to service students

in a particular way? Do you have to teach classes?

AH

The Wattis is a part of the school and our first and primary mission is to provide a meaningful contribution to an environment where people are learning about art and contemporary culture. The school doesn't dictate how we should do that, and there are no predetermined bullet points that we need to fulfill, but that central goal is what motivates our decisions and our priorities. We aim to be a freely accessible and available resource where students, faculty, the entire CCA community, as well as the general public, can learn about and learn from some of the most significant emerging or under-known voices in the contemporary art conversation nation- and world-wide. CCA has a very strong faculty, and we try to build as many connections as possible between our work and theirs.

AK

That's great. It's an asset to be attached to an institution like that, but it's also nice to have the freedom to determine how best to develop that relationship as opposed to being given a mandate.

AH

Yes, we have the stability of a larger institution, but also the ability to remain open to taking risks, to experiment with new models and approaches, and to constantly challenge and further refine what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

AK

That's great. And how many curators and people on the team do you have at Wattis?

AH

There's myself as the Chief Curator, and Kim Nguyen as Curator, and there is Leila Grothe as Associate Curator, who also produces all of exhibitions with Kim and I. Jeanne Gerrity is the Deputy Director and runs all of the operations, budgets, and also oversees the public programs, the publications, and works with me very closely on the research seasons, which is a significant part of our artistic program. Calen Barca-Hall is the incredibly talented head of

installation and exhibition design, and he oversees everything that has to do with designing and building and installing the shows. Jeanne has an assistant, Christopher Squier, and he does all of the office management, oversees the front desk and the gallery attendants, and is the main liaison with CCA's finance department in terms of tracking our expenses and submitting receipts and invoices. He is also developing new education and outreach initiatives, with public tours, collaborations with students, and other projects. Then, there is the support from CCA. There is Carleigh McDonald, who works in CCA's Development department and works closely on the Wattis membership program and individual donor cultivation, and there is Lindsey DeVries, who works in CCA's Marketing and Communications department, who is our press liaison.

AK

How many exhibitions do you try to do a year? Is there a fixed program?

AH

We try to stay away from anything too templated. There isn't a fixed "grid" that we fill out every year with content. We really want to allow the content to drive what we do. For example, we recently did a show with the choreographer Adam Linder, and due to the nature of his work and the economic structures he works with, the show lasted only three weeks, which led us to develop a different schedule and rhythm for other exhibitions that year. We also recently produced a major group show, which was another departure from a regular schedule or exhibition planning structure. Even though it has varied widely over the years, we generally tend to have four openings per year, with each one consisting of either one show or two shows.

AK

Great. How many square feet is your space again?

AH

That also depends. The main space that we use consistently is about 5,000 square feet, but the second half of the building has additional space. The Wattis shares this additional space with the school, but since it often remains empty, we use it regularly for performances and events, as well as exhibitions. We also built a bar inside of it, which houses our research institute.

AK

What is your operating budget?

AH

If you include the mortgage on the building, the salaries and health benefits, and the programming and operating budget, it's around \$1.2 million. However, there are additional costs covered by CCA, such as the apartment that hosts our artist-in-residence, the administrative support in accounting, development, IT, and marketing, or even the building's insurance, maintenance, and security.

AK

That sounds really dreamy to be able to just focus on the content and not on all of the other structural things that directors often have to deal with. I'd love to talk more conceptually. I'm curious, what was it that you wanted to do when you got to Wattis? What are some of the things that brought you there, but then also, what was it you wanted to do right off the bat? It really has changed under your directorship.

AH

First and foremost, I think the Wattis has had a remarkable history of exhibitions and has shown a willingness and even an eagerness to experiment with new approaches and ideas. That was a big draw. There truly aren't that many places like it in the U.S. Another big draw was the fact that it is part of a school, which inscribes everything within a context that's not just about display, but also about thinking and learning. And then, honestly, there were some obvious similarities between what I was doing at Hunter College at the time and what the context at the Wattis offered. Taking this on was an opportunity to continue and build on what I had been doing. So, the opportunity to come to the Wattis became an opportunity to further develop a particular way of approaching institution-making that I had begun a few years prior, at a smaller scale. The Wattis was not only an appropriate context in which to expand it, but it also provided a strong and stable infrastructure to do so.

AK

We should say for the record that you founded The Artist's Institute.

AH

It's hard for me to talk about what it is that I've been trying to do here without talking about what I was trying to do there.

AK

And I think that's okay.

AH

What I was trying to do at The Artist's Institute took as a departure point this word that you guys are working with—institute. From the very beginning, that term was central to my thinking because I felt it contained a lot of questions and a lot of possibilities. It felt not exactly undefined, but a bit less defined than the words like "museum" or "gallery" or even "center." What does an "institute" refer to? What kind of a place is that? To me, the openness of that question provided an entry point.

What really informed and guided the initial ideas for and the creation of The Artist's Institute was bringing together two types of institutes: an art world one and an academic one. Back in 2009, I was developing The Artist's Institute within the context of Hunter College, in New York, and I was in a crossroads between an art project and an academic one (the Wattis Institute is situated similarly, also in the context of a school, the California College of the Arts). Because of that, my goal was to develop a way to bring these two institutes together and combine two different modalities, these two different ways of working with art and with knowledge production.

On one hand, in the art context, there's the institute in the sense of the ICA, which, in very general terms, refers to a public exhibition and event venue where lots of public activity happens, like exhibitions and public programming. It's a kunsthalle, a non-collecting, dynamic, public forum for art, always reinventing itself. There are places like the ICA Philadelphia or the ICA London or the ICA Boston, or many others.

But in the academic context, an institute is something different. It's usually a small, not-so-public place where a community of people are gathered together under one specific interest they share in common. At Hunter, there was The Institute for Sustainable Cities or the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute, for example, but all universities have many of these. They are research institutes, not classrooms. They are not places where there are teachers teaching students, but more like think tanks where a group of people who are pursuing advanced levels of scholarship and open-ended research around a similar topic are gathered together. I was really interested in the differences in form between those two types of institutes, the differences in scale, in structure, and how merging them might provide a different way to work with artists.

TAUSIF NOOR

I think there's also this implication of sustained focus and having a separate sphere where you can work intensely on something, and develop research, and dive deep into something away from the broader aspects of the university. It's like a hub of sorts. I think this might be a nice transition to talk about the research institute within Wattis.

AH

Absolutely. At The Artist's Institute, the idea was simple: Divide the year into two six-month seasons, and dedicate each one to a single artist. That way, we could incorporate the longer-term investment and the in-depth engagement of a research institute, but by being based in a storefront space on the Lower East Side, and not on the 10th floor of a school building on 68th street, it was also a much more public space for the display of artworks and public events, free and open to an audience of passersby. We would show only one work at a time, not only because the space was small, but because it was not trying to be a place for "exhibitions," it was not a gallery or an art center, it was an institute, a place about thinking, about spending time, about learning, about convening an intellectual community, and also a place for an audience to gather to see artworks. But I was ultimately constrained by infrastructure and space. I essentially tried to merge these two institutes into one tiny basement, where on one hand there'd be a little bit of display activity with the single work on view—an institute in the ICA sense—and a little bit of think-tank activity, an institute in the other sense. Both would happen simultaneously: we would be open to the public, and people would come see the one work, and we would host many public lectures and performances and screenings; and the think-tank side would happen mostly in the context of the graduate student group conversations.

At the Wattis, I've been able to continue but also expand on and develop this model. The institution was already called the "Wattis Institute"; it was also part of a school; it already had a reputation for experimenting with new approaches; and it came with a lot more stability, shelf-life, and infrastructure. This allowed me to continue the idea of having two institutes and to provide each one with what it needed: a beautiful gallery space for exhibitions, and a separate space for the think-tank or longer-term research work. As an ICA, the Wattis has a great gallery space for the display of artworks, and as a research institute, we built a smaller space, commissioned an artist to

make it into a bar, and it gave us a space for people, a space for convening a community around a series of discussions and events. My hope is that by making these two institutes as distinct and different from each other as possible, with different architectures, different schedules, and different types of artists, I would be able to propose an institutional model for working with artists in two distinct and differentiated ways: as an ICA and as a research institute. Those are two completely different ways of working and learning from artists, and when they're happening side by side, I think they can generate a powerful place for art.

AK

Can you talk a little more specifically about how that's broken down in a season?

AH

As an exhibition venue, or an ICA, we structure each year around a series of solo shows. Our space is not huge, so the exhibitions are not survey shows but involve either newly commissioned work or a specific body of work. Sometimes an artist takes over the whole space, and other times two separate solo exhibitions are on view concurrently in separate galleries. If our mission is to learn from artists, and for our audience to learn from artists, I think it's important for the program to be based on showing one artist at a time and on giving each artist a significant amount of attention, time, resources, and space. That way, as a curator, I can spend a lot of time with each artist. I can do many studio visits over the course of two years, and I can maintain and build a sustained dialogue with each artist and give their show the attention it needs and deserves—something that is hard to do with big group shows.

On the other side of the building is the bar, where we work not as an exhibition venue but as that other kind of institute, as a research institute or a think tank. This space deliberately does not look like a place where you would put art on display—the walls are dark, there is a bar taking over part of the room, there are bookcases. This space is dedicated to a single artist for an entire year. It's a place where a community will gather, over the course of a year, to discuss and reflect on a range of subjects and ideas as they relate to a single artist's work.

In other words, as an ICA, we offer an artist resources to produce new work and space to show it in. And as a research institute, we offer an artist a year of attention, which involves a reading group, a series of public events, and a publication. Those become two different and distinct ways to work with artists and to learn from artists. The way we frame and distinguish these two modes is by saying that there is one artist "on view" or "in the galleries" (i.e. there's an exhibition) and there is another artist "on our mind" (i.e. there's no

exhibition but there is a year for reflection, discussion, events, publishing, etc.).

AK

Do the exhibition side and the inquiry side ever touch? Do you ever have a show with the artist that is also being considered for a year?

AH

No. They have not yet, but there are no rules here. We're just inventing this as we go along. Maybe one day they will touch, but as of now, they have not because I'm trying to really emphasize a difference between two ways of working with artists. I think that by having these two modes of working, these two institutes, we can speak to our mission in more complex and textured ways—in fact, we recently rewrote our mission statement so that it takes on the form of a question: "What and how can we learn from artists today?"

AK

That's a wonderful statement.

AH

I like this notion that a mission statement can be a question, because depending on the year, on what's happening in the world, depending on who the director is, depending on what is driving the art dialogue, the answer to that question will be very different. But fundamentally, as an institution, we can be driven by a central question that we're asking ourselves and that we're asking the audience to think about. It's like a score. The way that a score is performed and interpreted will depend on who is playing it and on what is happening in the world and on all kinds of things. Currently, we are answering the question in two ways: as an exhibition space, we learn from artists by showing new and existing work by artists from around the world; and as a research institute, we learn from artists by committing an entire year to reflecting on the questions posed by a single artist's work.

As an institute in the sense of an ICA, we are asking artists: *What are you making now and what do you want to make next?* As an institute in the sense of a think tank, we are asking our community: *How does this single artist's work speak to broader questions about art, culture, and society today?*

A few common misconceptions about our research season are that it is a "fan club" for a particular artist, or that it is about dissecting or analyzing a particular artist over the course of a year. That is certainly not what we do! The intention is really to take one artist and an artist's body of work as a kind

of tool for thinking and use it as a point of departure. This artist—whether it's Seth Price, Rosemarie Trockel, or David Hammons—puts a series of questions on the table, so to speak, which are about art, about politics, about gender, about race, about science, about all sorts of subjects. Each artist provides us with a broad thematic terrain. And it's that thematic territory that we're going to spend a year talking about and exploring and engaging with, and this will lead us to a wide range of other artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, poets, scientists, politicians, theorists, and so on. The goal is not to convene or to become Seth Price experts or David Hammons experts, but to take an artist's work as a source of questions about a wide range of subjects, and to explore those subjects more broadly in art and in society in general. In that sense, our year with David Hammons, a year when we become the David Hammons Institute, we were inspired by his work to produce a series of public programs and commissioned essays that included filmmakers, poets, and musicians who might never have even heard of David Hammons before.

AK

Is the artist that you're focusing on ever involved in these programmatic institute decisions?

AH

It depends on the artist, and it has varied, but in general the idea is that this year of activity is really "for" them, rather than being something they need to work on and create themselves. But before we launch each season, we spend a lot of time with each artist, talking to them about their work and looking through their archives. When we finally launch the public program, the first event is always an expert on that artist, since it's important to introduce the audience to that artist's work, before we start spiraling outwards and going farther afield.

AK

Right. So, they know they're being considered, they know they're being thought through, and they can decide how active a role they want to play.

AH

That's right. They also come to San Francisco to do a public event as well and to meet with the reading group.

AK

And David Hammons too? Wow.

AH

Well, Hammons was an exception. David told me he understood what we were doing and was happy to hear that his work had inspired us to try to convene this group of people to really give it this attention and focus, but he didn't see any role he wanted to play in it himself.

AK

Does this information that you gather get compiled somewhere and is it made public for future scholarship?

AH

In part. One of the components of the year-long research season is a reading and discussion group that meets once a month for a calendar year.

AK

Are they mostly CCA students or are they open to the general public?

AH

The group is not open to the public and is made up mostly of CCA faculty, as well as a few local artists and art historians and writers. It's one of the important ways we build strong and lasting connections between the Wattis and CCA faculty. We begin by sending out an email to CCA faculty saying that the next year-long research season at the Wattis is going to revolve around the work of, say, David Hammons, and for those who might not be familiar with this artist, we include an initial series of questions that his work brings up. We then invite anyone to get in touch whose own work or research relates to these topics in some way. In other words, if what we will be discussing in a Hammons-related reading group seems like it could overlap with something they are currently working on, or have an interest in, then perhaps joining the reading group could be productive for them and their own work as well. We then also reach out to particular artists and curators and art historians from around town to add to the group.

We end up with between 10 and 12 people who commit to meeting once a month for a year. It's run pretty much like a book club: each member takes a turn running one of the monthly meetings. They choose one work by the artist as a point of departure for each meeting, and they lead a conversation

about how it relates to a question or an idea they've been working on or are invested in—whether it's in art or not. It follows the model of an academic think tank in that way: it convenes an intellectual community of professionals whose work all shares an affinity with or overlaps with some general research area. In our case, that area is "David Hammons," or "Joan Jonas," or "Andrea Fraser." The group meets from January through December.

In September of each year, so several months after the reading group has been meeting, we launch the public face of the season and begin a public series of events that run from September to the following summer, or an entire academic year. As we plan and curate those public events, we obviously pull from the discussions that take place in the reading group and we often invite members of the group to organize or host public events as well. These public lectures, screenings, performances, or other events are all free and open to all, and are then archived online.

The final stage of each season is the publication. Again, there is no consistent form or model for that, and each book has been quite different. In general, though, we like to commission the reading group members to write essays and we incorporate excerpts from various public lectures. The Joan Jonas book was like a compendium of various references and quotes that took place both in the context of the private conversations and in the context of the public ones. It just brought it all together in one book. Andrea Fraser made an artist book, co-published with MIT Press and Westreich Wagner, which ended up getting quite a lot of press. The David Hammons book that just came out is a merger between some archival material that we found, some excerpts from some of the public events, and some images that David sent us in the mail. So, going back to your question of how much of this is public: yes, absolutely, there is a year-long series of public programs, there is a website, and there are books. But there is also a private side, as in any academic research institute, which is an intimate group of peers who gather every month in a year-long dialogue.

AK

What's lovely about the model you're proposing is that it's really a form of scholarship through practice. That's open-ended because it's not bound by the strictures of a particular departmental discipline, but it seems like it can follow different disciplinary throughways because of the practice-based focus.

AH

This is an institute. For me, all of this comes out of this word.

AK

Right. Do you do programming related to the exhibition side of things too, or is the programming really strictly on the scholarship side?

AH

That's a good question, because it's an issue for us. For me, in order to emphasize the type of sustained and year-long attention we're giving to a single artist, it's been important to have every event we announce be something that circles around the same figure again, and again, and again, month after month. There is a stubbornness to that which I find important. This starts to get diluted with every announcement about other events that have nothing to do with that artist. As a result, to answer your question, no, we mostly do not do programming around the shows. But I think we will be looking to change that moving forward.

TN

I wanted to touch on the legacy of the Capp Street artist residency model. I was at Wattis last month to see the show that *contemporary* curated. Is that a regular project that happens at Wattis or is that a special one-off thing?

AH

It's every year. Every year, we invite an artist to come spend several months here. We have an apartment for them, and we arrange some teaching opportunities for them at CCA. For me, an important part of what the Capp Street residency has always been about was having an artist spend time in San Francisco. Not only does the Wattis offer its community a series of exhibitions, lectures, and other events, but it also offers San Francisco an artist, who will be here for 4 months, who will go to openings at galleries and other museums, who will go to dinner parties and bars, and who will become part of the community here. This has become increasingly important in recent years, when the cost of living has led so many artists to move away, and so the Capp Street residency is a way the Wattis can have artists like Nairy Baghramian,

Melanie Gilligan, Carissa Rodriguez, or *contemporary* become part of the community for a few months. Abbas Akhavan is arriving in a few weeks and will be here until the summer.

What each resident does in terms of exhibitions at the end is completely up to them. There doesn't even necessarily have to be an exhibition if the artist prefers not to do one, but most of the time, there is an exhibition of either their work or something that they have curated. Since *contemporary* is an editorial group, it was not immediately obvious what their exhibition would be. In their case, it became clear that they would be acting more as curators of an exhibition. So, that's what they did. They curated a show of six moving image works and commissioned a series of essays. Nairy Baghramian also curated a show instead of showing her own work. But Melanie Gilligan and Carissa Rodriguez both made work of their own for their residency.

TN

What was interesting about seeing that model was seeing a lot of activity going on in a relatively small, contained sphere.

AH

I guess you didn't see the bar when you were there?

TN

No, I didn't see it.

AK

I've seen the bar though—it's great. I'm assuming there's drinking when this book club is meeting?

AH

Absolutely.

AK

It's good to keep things lubricated. But who do you think of as your audience? You had mentioned earlier CCA members obviously, but one of the things that I think about a lot is whether you think of your

audience as being the same thing as your community. Audience is a monolithic term that can be broken down, but I'm curious how those words work for you.

AH

That's a great question. You know, to say "everyone" is a silly thing to say, but obviously the door is open to anyone. But a place of our scale, and our resources, and our infrastructure provides certain parameters. Who are we equipped to reach? With whom do we have the tools to be able to develop a meaningful conversation? We're not SFMOMA. We don't have the tools and infrastructure and resources to put ads on the sides of buses and to attract a mainstream audience or to 'convince' people to care about art. I'm very happy that museums like SFMOMA are doing that work, because it's very important to do, but I'm aware that if we tried to do that, we just wouldn't do it very well.

What I think about a lot is not just "what should we do" but "what do we have the tools to do really well?" and to use that as a way to establish our goals and to determine our priorities. I feel like what we can do really well is contribute something meaningful to a community that cares about contemporary art and culture. Obviously, our first audience is the CCA community of students and faculty, all of whom are already invested and interested in art and culture since they are part of an art school. Expanding outwards from that, our audience is anyone who is interested in contemporary art and experimental culture. Our audience is artists, art students, art historians, art teachers, curators, critics, writers, filmmakers, performers, musicians, and anyone involved in the production of contemporary culture. And even beyond that, our audience is people who are interested in discovery, in the unknown or the lesser-known, and in being surprised. But again, the door is open to absolutely anyone to walk in off the street, and every single thing we do is always free. We also develop a lot of pedagogical tools like handouts and free didactic materials, tours, and other resources that aim to allow people of all kinds of backgrounds to learn from artists.

Hopefully, everyone in the Bay Area who is interested in contemporary art and experimental culture knows that there is a headquarters for that in their city. There's a place that is fully committed, every day of the year, to trying to give visibility to contemporary forms of expression, trying to move those ideas forward, to support and provide resources and opportunities to the artists and writers and thinkers who are in that field and are trying to move those conversations into the future. That we are a resource to everyone and anyone who is curious and interested in participating in that. I think that's our primary audience.

TN

That's awesome.

AK

Two things occurred to me out of that last train of thought. One of them was thinking about design. Earlier, you were talking about your curatorial ethos traveling with you to the Wattis Institute from The Artist's Institute. Something that I noticed was the way that you have worked with design from one institution to another, and the way that you communicate your project.

AH

Design was one way of pointing to the fact that my work at the Wattis Institute is a continuation of something that had begun at The Artist's Institute. In terms of how I communicate that, I think you might be referring to the particular way I have used language. I feel that institutions can profit from having a personality, a temperament, and not be something that claims objectivity or impartiality, because there is nothing objective or impartial about any institution. I wonder about what it could mean for an institution to have a personality, to have quirks, to have eccentricities, to have a mood, to have a bad day and a good day, and to speak in a particular or identifiable tone of voice.

TN

To have all those things combined, in a way, defines what an institution's politics are.

AH

Right. Our politics are in what we do and how we do it, not in what we say about what we do. With design, I wanted something that could speak to what that personality is; something that is playful but also something that's not possible to be consumed too quickly. The design is asking a bit more of its audience, it's not immediately "consumer-friendly" in that sense, but it's asking you to take some time to engage, to try to sink your teeth into figuring it out. It's a bit of a surprising or unusual website. The hope is that people will read and play with and spend some time working their way through it, discovering

how it works and how it communicates.

AK

I think that was something that was really striking for me. You are working with the same designer, right? Is it David Reinfurt or is it Dexter Sinister who does the design?

AH

David did the website.

AK

Institutions are often so territorial about their identity, so it's interesting to see you also playing with how design is functioning between different institutions.

AH

For me, the design is meant to emphasize that the writing, or forms of expression, is what the identity is.

AK

Exactly.

AH

And there is more than one voice! I write about my shows in one way, but Kim uses her own voice when writing about her shows, which is different. That way, the institution can emphasize that it's a place made up of different voices.

AK

That's nice.

AH

It's not about trying to cram everything into some institutional voice. All there is are forms of expressions, and different people are communicating their perspective on art to an audience in their own voice.

AK

You hit the nail on the head. There are different models. In larger institutions, curators don't even sign their names at the end of the texts. The idea of the voice operating in service of the institution versus understanding that institutions are made up of individual voices. Those are very different ways of thinking about things.

AH

They're made up of individual voices.

AK

I was also wondering where you feel the Wattis exists within the ecology of San Francisco. This also then leads to a more conceptual question about who you think of as your peers. Those can be people that you're in dialogue with, or institutions that exist anywhere in the world or historical precedents. We're really interested to hear how you think about that with local specificity and historical expansiveness.

AH

First and foremost, San Francisco is in the water we drink. Every decision I make, artist I invite, essay I write, or visitor I greet, I do so from the perspective of being someone who lives and works in San Francisco. What that means, exactly, is hard to define and is perhaps best left undefined. It's also certainly very different for everyone. But it's fundamental. I also think very carefully about San Francisco on a curatorial level. On one hand, we try and invite artists from around the world whose work feels like it could resonate with some local concerns. I hope that our local context could be a productive one for their work, that it will bring something to it that it didn't have elsewhere. And then, we also invite local artists whose work feels like it resonates with a conversation that's happening at the national or international

level. When we work with an artist from San Francisco, for example, it's obviously to give them some visibility on a national and international level, but it's also a way for us to connect them to a broader dialogue in art that's happening elsewhere, rather than to celebrate how "local" the work is.

One other beautiful thing about San Francisco is how incredibly supportive everyone is of each other. I don't know if "uncompetitive" is quite the right word, but everyone will always recommend each other when visitors from out of town come by, and everyone always goes to each other's events. There's this incredible community that really understands and values the distinct nature of what everyone is doing.

AK

We should also state on the record that you're a non-collecting institution. Is everything free at Wattis? Are programs free?

AH

Everything is always free.

AK

Thinking about the specificity of San Francisco and the extraordinary cost of living there, to create a space of free resources actually plays a particular role in a city like that.

AH

It's really about what we can do to make it so that artists can continue to play a strong role and have a loud voice in the city of San Francisco. What can the Wattis do to help make that happen?

Again, if our general guiding question is, "What and how can we learn from artists today?" that relies on having artists to learn from.

AK

Right.

AH

We need artists in our community. What questions are they asking about current events? What are they asking about art or about abstraction or about color or about politics? What questions are artists asking themselves today?

What forms are they inventing? How do they work in the current climate and what does it mean to them, and how can we be a place that supports a wide range of different artists for whom the world means very different things today?

Therefore, the larger question is: what can we do to make sure that artists have a voice in our society and that that voice is supported and empowered and given visibility and given weight? What can we do to make sure that in the context of all the many voices out there—institutional voices, curators, politicians, economists, the media—that artists are heard as loudly and as clearly as possible?

AK

I'm curious to return to that question of other models you might be looking to or other people or other places that you see yourself in dialogue with.

TN

That you feel share this ethos.

AH

I know I sound like I'm saying the same thing over and over again, but for me artists are the model.

AK

That's a great answer.

AH

One of the things I feel like I've learned from artists is that art is not necessarily in the problem-solving business. It is not always there to prove a point or resolve an injustice, but to complicate the terms or complicate what a "problem" or a "solution" might even consist of. I don't see an exhibition as being an explanation machine, but as a way to create a space full of overlapping, but also contradicting ideas and forms and experiences, within which a visitor works to situate herself. And so, I have come to see my role as a curator and institution director as one that works to keep culture complicated. I think this is even more urgent now, in a polarized cultural and political context that operates according to a winner-takes-all logic, a "you're either with us or you're against us" logic, or that reduces complicated individuals and subjectivities into different types of demographic groups, always adjusted so as to best fit a political agenda, whether it comes from the right or the left. It seems more crucial than ever for our institutions and our exhibitions to

be spaces for difference, contradiction, and paradox, rather than spaces for consensus. That way, I think, our museums, institutions, and institutes can be places where a broad and diverse public can come into contact with new and different ideas but be empowered to make up their own mind about what they see.

I also think a lot about small scales. One question I consistently ask myself is: What can a place of my scale do that a larger space, or a museum, cannot do, or is not even equipped to do? We all feel the difference between a locally-owned, family-run, independent bookstore versus a Barnes & Noble, not that one is better than the other, as there are plenty of pros and cons with both, but each one certainly offers something that the other one isn't able to. And so, in terms of an art institution, what is it that an intimate, personal, and face-to-face scale can establish or provide?

AK

That's a major question for us and especially one we've been asking directors.

AH

For me, scale is one of the Wattis's most important advantages.

AK

Right. So, you'd like to stay within the means that you're in now.

AH

Absolutely.

AK

And that is the only way to do what you do.

AH

Or get smaller.

AK

Or get smaller. I love that.

AH

I'm serious.

AK

That's great.

AH

I am thinking about turning our smaller second gallery into the bar, which means that would shrink our exhibition space. The fact that you didn't see the bar when you visited to see the *contemporary* show is a problem, because that means that a whole 50% of what we stand for was not part of your experience. You were not able to see that this institution works with artists in two different ways, and that each one has its own architecture and its own type of space. One has a white cube, to display objects, and the other has a bar, to convene people. So, one way I could make that institutional identity clearer would be to actually reduce our exhibition footprint (by choice, not by necessity). So, getting smaller is perhaps what we will do.

TN

I think it's so great to hear this perspective. I think so often—particularly with institutions that are part of larger ecosystems such as universities—it's difficult to resist the pressure to instrumentalize art. That artists' perspectives can exist *qua* artist perspectives, rather than in service to a larger agenda, is a wonderful thing.

AK

Another kind of question we've been asking everyone is if there are any particular roadblocks or frustrations that you've had that have formed or shaped what you've done. Is part of that a question of visibility and scale?

AH

That's not really a roadblock for me. The roadblock is maybe pointing to what you guys just said about instrumentalization. A lot of people feel like that is what "should" be done. I struggle with the expectation that it's what we should be doing, that we should be pursuing a specific agenda and inviting artists to respond to it. But I try and give artists as much freedom and space as

possible, and to make it clear that they are not operating under some kind of predetermined agenda.

TN

Absolutely.

AK

We'd love to hear your thinking about your long-term plans in relation to the institution. It was really fantastic to hear you talk more about your curatorial vision independent of any institution and how that's just the way you need to be working as an individual regardless of what institutional framework you're in. I'm curious if you could be very happy staying at Wattis for 25 years or if it's something that you feel would need to move to another space at some point in time.

AH

I think ultimately all of us have a general way of thinking, you know? There's a specificity to each of our ways of thinking, but each job and the communities of those jobs are going to lead our way of thinking to manifest itself in different ways. We each have our way of approaching things, but it's going to look different and it's going to be called something different depending on where we are, who we're working with, and what tools we're using. If it's an exhibition space, this will take the form of exhibitions, if it's a publishing house, it will be books, and so on. I see myself as wanting to stay open to all of those options as long as I can maintain a close proximity to artists and to be actively learning from artists.

Learning from artists also means that we're always learning all the time. It's crucial, I think, to always remain in a learning mode, to be open to the fact that we don't know what art is doing or what we're doing; that there are always places and people to learn from.