

Conversation with
BINNA CHOI,
Casco Art Institute:
Working for the
Commons

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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02.04.19

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Binna Choi is the Curator and
Director of Casco Art Institute:
Working for the Commons in
Utrecht, Netherlands.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

TAUSIF NOOR:

When and how was Casco Art
Institute founded?

BINNA CHOI:

Casco was founded in 1990 at a storefront in Utrecht that was around three times smaller than the space we are in now. There was no hierarchical structure. It was just set up by three artists and art historians from Utrecht. In 2018, Casco was re-established with the current name, ethos and structure.

ALEX KLEIN:

How long have you been at
Casco?

BC:

Just over 10 years. Last year was my 10th anniversary at Casco; I had begun just as the 2008 financial crisis was unfolding. Even during the time I was applying for the directorship position, there was a strong desire to continue its program, of which I had so much affection for its proximity to artists, its varied forms of doing things together as driven by artists, all with a keen sense on design as a tool for articulation. But I felt that I had to do something more than that. The happy times were gone; there were more instabilities, urgencies, and precarities.

AK:

And what is your title at Casco?

BC:

Director.

AK:

How many directors have there been prior to you?

BC:

Only two. In 1996, our first director, Lisette Smits, was appointed, and she was there for about 10 years. And then Emily Pethick came on board as the second director and she was there for just over three years.

AK:

Great. We actually interviewed Emily when she was still at The Showroom. How many people work at Casco currently?

BC:

We are a team of six.

TN:

Has your organization grown since you've been there?

BC:

When I began, there were three people. At that time the board had already wanted to add one more person who could focus on communications and fundraising, a kind of projection of the impossible dream. After a certain cycle of trial and error, I became convinced that you begin with the program and money follows. Hence, we'd rather work with an additional curator or community organizer, not a fundraiser.

AK:

You mentioned the sense of precarity during the financial crisis. Do you feel that is still present in the institution, or did that fade over time as the economy recovered? It seems like there is always a sense of precarity when it comes to the arts. This also leads me to ask how your funding is structured. From a U.S. perspective, we always think of Europe as a

utopian place with unlimited funding for the arts, because we have practically no government support for the arts here. But I know that the funding structure has changed quite a bit in the Netherlands in the past few years and that it's not as robust as it used to be.

BC:

Yes, in a way, you're right: the "economy" has kind of been recovering and there is a certain amount of money for art in the Dutch public sector, but, at what cost? What kind of economy has been recovering, and for whom? What do we mean by the notion of "economy" actually? I still don't know how to look at that. It took ten years for that to come to focus, or rather, it took us that time to dedicate the institution around the commons-based socio-political-economic system and worldviews.

As part of the very first activity I curated, which was in the framework of the project Radical Cartography initiated by Lize Mogel, we had Massimo De Angelis, the commons-economic theorist, who made a plea for the commons to inject or imbue the existing infrastructure that had been—and mostly still is—operating by a capitalist logic. In 2013, we took the commons as a theme of the program, during which the pendulum state of mind had been intensified. We decided we could either treat it as a one-time inquiry and move on, or we could try to go deeper and make ourselves as an example of the commons. In the end we went for the latter approach and shifted our institutional corpus and modus operandi, changing our name to "Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons."

AK:

We're really fascinated by the name change and would love for you to talk a little bit more about the language. We're curious about how you shifted from being an "office" of design and theory to an art institute, specifically because "institute" is a word that we've been thinking about. Has that changed the mission, and also does the name "Casco" stand for something?

BC:

Casco in Dutch means architecture with a bare minimum of structure, without windows or without floors. So, when a property is sold, sometimes it is as “casco.” We interpret it as an open architecture with possibility.

AK:

That’s wonderful.

BC:

While the full name has officially been changed two times, the institution still called as Casco, though it can be written in the way we intend, as “Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.” We still insist on changing to the full current name, as a meaningful act of intervention.

Having said that, language and the commons as a theme to the institutional mission—both of which might not be seen as significant changes—are actually making a huge impact. These changes even made me become estranged from a habit of understanding and speaking about the commons; I felt I did not know the subject any longer, which was a bizarre experience. We ran programs between 2013 and 2015 as a research trajectory on the emergence of the commons, with different definitions for, horizons of, and critical angles around commoning practices. For instance, the notion of a reproductive commons—a commons from a feminist angle—was crucial and played out there from the very beginning, based on a long-term project that was foundational for my time at Casco, titled *Grand Domestic Revolution*, which took the home as a political site for organizing non-capitalist, patriarchal ways of living. We also ended up investigating with the notion of “the undercommons,” through the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. They discuss the managerial commons as another enclosure and instead urge for the fugitive form of commoning, learning much, indebted much to the history of anti-slavery and anti-racist struggles.

But I felt we couldn’t *just* use this language if we were to really broaden the field of the commons—meaning reaching our public more deeply and broadening and diversifying the publics as well. On top of that, we can’t just use art as a form of research or as a non-institutional way of learning and knowing. The relationship between art and the commons is something we have to be much more open and clearer about, while knowing from the onset that the art of the commons is not social realism. If it’s neither simply community art, nor relational aesthetics, nor public art, then what is it?

A helpful turning point was actually to acknowledge that it’s not that we run the institution as we know it, but that we also bring questions to the fore. It also became clear to me that you can begin with a simple definition of the commons—a co-managed vital resource—and move onto sharing with the public the complex conditions and notions of the commons. Here, art has

come to play diverse roles, such as making those notions sensible, palpable, and questionable. There's no fixed art form that does not. Interestingly, with this endeavor, our program has been far more open to different art forms, consequently not excluding but marginalizing conceptual arts or "artistic research" that took the center in our program.

AK:

Right. With all of these intensive and critical investigations taking place in public, I'm curious how it's mirrored within your institution with regard to how labor is organized and how you compensate people, both staff and also artists. How is work-life balance handled internally and does it mirror the way that you're critically thinking externally about these relations? Is there a relationship?

BC:

In a way that's at the very core of the change we made, and the long-term project that the artist Annette Krauss and the whole (shifting) team of Casco has been working on since 2014, called "Site for Unlearning (Art Organization)." The main concerns of the project as we've explored and articulated it together have become: How can we unlearn a habit of working that devalues reproductive labor and keeps us in the anxiety or frustration triggering cycle of busyness and the logic of productivity? Can an institution really allow its workers to have deep understanding of what it does and its relations, which we later started understanding as "study" as elaborated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney? These questions correspond to both the "front" side of the institution as well as its "back," so that you practice as you preach or "present." The project includes a series of exercises that we collectively developed and tried, which for a few occasions were also presented in exhibitions or talks in and out of our own institutional wall.

AK:

How did you do that? What were some of those exercises, because I personally want to learn how to be unbusy and unproductive.

BC:

There are about 16 different exercises so far, including something banal, yet important like reading together; regular & plenary team meetings, checking the interdependency and care relations. In relation to the question of wage, one exercise is called "Property Relations" and another is "Wage and Wellbeing." Property relations was organized to see how our practice and our sense of being in relation to business and productivity relate to the property that we have or that we have access to. We realized that it's actually quite tough to do this. Not everyone saw the relation between this and the productivity, which also is often associated with socialist conceptions of equality and deprivation.

AK:

Right.

BC:

It was a one-time exercise at the program level, but it remains one of the key issues being dealt with in varied other forms. One example is the project we've begun with the artist collaborative The Outsiders called the Center for Ecological (Un)learning, which revolves around a dysfunctional farmhouse in a part of the city called Leidsche Rijn, an area which we treat as an exemplary site for the commons—whether that's a story of success or failure. The other exercise in "Wage and Wellbeing," which we took from the *Take Back the Economy* handbook by the Community Economy Research Network, dealt with the wage issue more directly. It looked at the compensation for work from five different angles—material, occupational well-being, social well-being, community, and physical well-being. It's trying to diversify the value from work and its rewards beyond financial value. It is not to undermine the importance of the wage negotiation, but I think it's important to recognize the diversity of values that we work for and with, not to use the same master's tool.

TN:

I find it really interesting that you are a small institution, but you're thinking very broadly with these ideas of work, labor, and the commons. All of these ideas are social and relational, and as you've discussed, you do a lot of collaborations, especially because you do public programming, workshops, publications, and exhibitions.

Can you tell us a little bit about how you partner with other organizations and institutions?

BC:

I have been un/learning again and again that this unlearning process becomes only relevant when we extend the team relation beyond itself to be situated in what we call the ecosystem (and again, how it's different from the union approach, as with the question of wage). The boundary of the ecosystem is not a clear cut one of course, and there's a habit of thinking of human actors only but still this is relevant as we can understand the institution comprises of a set of interdependent relationship beyond its office. It differs from the public relations as the ecosystem is a co-working organism of varies forms and intensities of give-take relationship. For instance, Annette Krauss is not part of the team but is there whenever there are any serious issues and in an important role for our Annual Assembly, a new structural feature of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.

In terms of our relations with other organizations, Arts Collaboratory (AC) has been growing deeper and bigger for us. AC began as a support structure made by two Dutch foundations, the DOEN Foundation and Hivos Foundation in 2007. Their focus has been supporting arts initiatives in non-Western contexts where there's no stable funding. Yet beyond the funding, they also wanted to see more exchange happening between those organizations, provided that most of the relations were structured by this vertical relation between the global north and south, rather than the horizontal geographical, cultural proximity as structure by the colonial-capitalist relation. It took a while to transform this within the network. That Casco came on board has to do with that transformative process. For instance, together with member organizations—who are funded by DOEN and Hivos within AC—we started organizing the Annual Assembly whereby about 50 people from Africa, Latin America, Middle East, South and Central Asia spend about a week long time together in a context where one or a couple of the member organizations operate in. In the second assembly in Senegal, I believe, there were moments when it "hurt good." We were realizing how the funding structure has been ruling our practice, even this network and relation, embodying the capitalist-patriarchal-colonial culture, how much joy is in gathering and learning from each other who are under the similar historical social and political contexts and the potentials we have to self-organize, collectivize?

Besides Arts Collaboratory, which is the most intense, affective, unusual kind of partnership, we are in several collaboratives and conservatorships. As a modus operandi of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, we have what we call "study lines" that offer the bases for both programming and our

political and ethical practices in organizing level. We have said that there's no study line established without a collective body formed or connected. There's a question though of how to navigate the dense web of relations. It could be time, energy, emotion consuming, without being able to be "productive" soon enough in the economy of presentation and show-business.

AK:

How does funding work for Casco? Do you have a board?

BC:

Yes, we have a board and they've also been integral part of this change.

AK:

Are they a funding board or more of an advisory board?

BC:

They're an advisory board. And then in terms of money, almost our entire funding comes from public institutions.

TN:

You mentioned the City Council— is there also a national level of funding for organizations like Casco?

BC:

There's what's called the four-year cyclical funding scheme both by every city council and the national ministry of culture for what they call *basisinfrastructuur*, or basic infrastructure. We have the one from the city of Utrecht but not in the national one. Besides, there's the Mondrian Fund which funds more directly to individuals but also provides a structural funding to what they call "presentation institution." We have been a long-term recipient of this fund.

AK:

Do you apply for funding for each project or for funds for each year of operating?

BC:

Project based funding makes a very small part of our budget, if you mean it as a one-time exhibition or so. We dedicate most of our energy in the funding for the multi-years program or projects. With those funding, we can privilege some flexibility in planning and realizing. At this moment, we are waiting for the result of the four-year funding application to the city council in Utrecht as well as the Ministry of Culture.

AK:

In the very beginning you mentioned that Casco was formerly located in a storefront. What kind of building is it located in now?

BC:

Now, in contrast to the storefront, we're located by a beautiful courtyard and we sit a bit in the back from the main street. But we are now centrally located in the Museumkwartier and our current building more spacious than the two premises before. The building used to be a school, on the site where the Catholic convent used to be around the 16th or 17th century.

AK:

Do you own the building, or do you pay rent?

BC:

It's a rental but owned by a non-profit, semipublic agency called De Plaatsmaker for artists studio and other art spaces. We found out the long-term tenant gallery was leaving this building and contacted De Plaatsmaker to take this over and keep it as the public property—it worked so our rent is half of the commercial price.

TN:

I'm interested how your exhibition schedule is structured. Do you have a set number of shows and events that you do per year? How does that cycle work?

BC:

We used to have a cycle of six exhibitions and six commissions at the storefront, until it got crowded and messed up by the parallel ongoing

activities as part of the first long-term project line *Grand Domestic Revolution*, along with the maintenance of apartment as the project headquarter/ residency. It was after this period that we moved to this building. As the modus operandi of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, we strengthened a regular cycle of the exhibition program to be twice a year, one in the spring and one in the autumn, which regards the institutional rhythm as very crucial for relationality both within and outside of the organization.

TN:

Great.

AK:

Can you talk a little bit about the context of Utrecht? I know it's not very far from Amsterdam, but it's a different city. What kind of role does Casco fill within the local cultural ecology in Utrecht, and thinking more broadly, in The Netherlands?

BC:

Utrecht is one of the four major cities in The Netherlands, but the smallest among those four after Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. The contemporary art scene is the least dynamic one among these four. Yet, distinctively, there are many art institutions that make the link between art and society more explicit, and there are a large number of students and teachers, as Utrecht has one of the biggest universities and art academies in the Netherlands. Over 35% of the population is under 35 years old and are yet more familiar with festival culture.

It's also a growing city with the increase of over one million people over last two decades with the expansion of the city, notably in Leidsche Rijn. As I mentioned, it's a part of the city that was formerly a rural-agricultural area and we're engaging this area through our study line, the Center for Ecological Unlearning. By taking that former farmhouse—which stands dysfunctionally in the middle of daily shopping center—as a symbolic site, we're examining it from the angle of the commons: the private and the public.

AK:

Are you the only contemporary art organization and exhibition space in Utrecht? What distinguishes Casco from the

other arts organizations in town?

BC:

The work we do around the farmhouse and offering that program within the walls of our building might be an example of something that is characteristic of what we do at Casco. We are always moving toward undoing binary views that becomes the base of judgmental and toxic mindsets. Likewise, we can be an art organization but also not. This may also tell why we are so close and find a “natural” milieu in common with the Gender Studies program of Utrecht University than any other art organization.

TN:

Going back to what you were saying about the demographics of Utrecht, I’m wondering who you think of as your audience. Do you think of your audience as the same thing as your community, and who do you think of as your collaborative community?

BC:

I guess you’re asking me this question because everyone is using this word “community” in different ways, and in fact, we do not intend a strict definition of it. Its mutation and vulnerability are not bad, but rather healthy perhaps; hence again the notion of ecosystem helps. However, I will say that we do not use the notion of “audience” so much, because it assumes that we are just providing a stage. It’s the communities that give legitimacy to the institution and the reason why the institution should exist—not an abstract public spectatorship. What we care about is how to relate to one another and how to consider diverse, different levels and entrances of understanding and relating to something. We’re not attempting to achieve total inclusivity and total accessibility but we’re attempting to work with awareness and kindness to differences as they exist. This is also perhaps how our work can be distinguished from large scale, popular cultural production. The work can be however small, minor, or intimate but that quality itself is as significant as a work at a bigger scale, as biological ecosystems tell us.

AK:

One of things we’re also really interested in is to hear you talk a little bit about who you think of as your peers, both on a practical

level and also on a conceptual level. We have a little bit of an inkling for this because of the work you've done previously, but for the purposes of the interview, can you talk a bit about your peer networks and who you look to for inspiration?

BC:

In Europe there is a network of arts organizations called CLUSTER, whose work fed into the 11th Gwangju Biennale in 2016, which I organized with Maria Lind. As part of this, we led a forum called *To All the Contributing Factors* on the occasion of the Biennale opening.

AK:

I think *To All the Contributing Factors* would be something wonderful to bring into this conversation. What led you to organize it and what came out of it? It was really impressive how many small-scale institutions that are constituted in different ways were having really intense conversations about the stakes and what it means to be doing the work we're doing and how we're doing it. It was exciting to engage with arts organizations that are working within different time frames and with different economies. I'm curious what led you to organize the convening in the midst of the 11th Gwangju Biennial and its relationship to Casco. What came out of it for you on the other end?

BC:

To make a long story short, there has been an exponential growth of "odd" or "minor" art organizations across the world for the last few decades that cannot fit existing institutional models of museum, gallery or kunsthalle.

Tensta Konsthall, which Maria Lind is running, and Casco are examples, as are all the others in Arts Collaboratory. When Maria was appointed by the artistic director of Gwangju Biennale, she invited me to join her and work together on the fellowship structure to address these organizations. I saw this opportunity as a way of redistributing the resources that otherwise concentrated on the biennale as well as one of the steppingstones for thinking of the next phase of these organizations, whose working conditions can be quite precarious as much as their practices are experimental or risk-taking. I would not characterize them all as merely as small or mid-size art organizations though; after all, any organization, whatever scale it is, is based on a “small” unit of four to six members. The question is how to cross and connect those four to six units.

TN:

Thank you for that background. Because you’d mentioned design as an organizing principle, I wanted to discuss your website, which has such a unique structure and is in Dutch and English. Can you also tell us a little bit about the design of the website?

BC:

We have been working for long with David Bennewith, the head of graphic design at Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam. We supported and presented his design research called “Latent Stare,” a deep, extensive inquiry of ideological implication of typography. As far as I can tell, David is not interested in making it easy to read, and is sometimes even interested in making it difficult, believing in the potential power of such reading—it’s unique in a world where everything is made to be so easily consumed, or is simple and “standard.” But we have encountered a dilemma too: We also can make use of a straightforward platform that is simply informative, while some others might remain “difficult.” Currently, we are planning a new website.

TN:

Are your program and exhibition texts available in both Dutch and English?

BC:

Yes, always bilingual.

AK:

Which I'm sure produces a lot of extra work.

BC:

There's a movement here where people are demanding a tax for English speaking countries to pay for non-English speaking ones, to balance the resources out.

AK:

Yes, exactly. It's obviously something that hampers our own project since we're only able to conduct the interviews in English and we realize the problematics of that. We hope in the future something else can be done about that. But for now, this is where we are. I'm curious about this question of accessibility—how do you think about that as an institution?

BC:

I have been learning about issues of accessibility from the perspective of disability justice from curator Staci Bu Shea, who is on our team, and also from people in our communities who give extra attention to that, by addressing again and again, for instance, that Casco is not wheelchair accessible. There had not been any institutional support for making it possible for organizations like Casco, with limited financial capabilities, to be more accessible when the municipality started paying attention to this issue.

In the meantime, we have been emphasizing other areas where we can make improvements in accessibility instead of simply waiting for the other issues to be solved. For instance, distinguishing from the neoliberal populist notion of accessibility, which is taken as easy and simple to consume. I have also been really keen on changing our communication language and unlearning habits of theoretical and hermeneutical approaches to artworks or projects in favor of taking more descriptive, concrete, and lively approaches with respect to art as we engage with it. Without starting here, there won't be more progress.

There's also the chicken-and-egg question: community first or infrastructure first? It's not simply or only wheelchair access that would naturally bring that particular community that is in need to the institution;

what we need to do in our program, in our language, in our relationships, is to pay attention to those needs.

TN:

I was just looking at the different staff positions that you have, and the job titles are really fascinating. These titles aren't ones that I've seen before—Curator of Language and Dissemination, Head of Diverse Economies. To me, it indicates that with regard to the structure of Casco, you're looking to form new models rather than rehashing previous ways of working. I'm interested in how you're thinking about the structure of Casco and what you're looking forward to.

BC:

We have been learning from the network of researchers in community and diverse economies, as initiated by economic geographer Julia Graham and Katherine Gibson, which argues for the importance of giving language to non-capitalist economic relations as a way to counter the capitalist dominance. The articulation of different positions in the team is also about unlearning the hierarchal, centralizing culture and commoning the institution by distributing different powers and attentions to different positions, different skills, different interests.

AK:

We've read previous interviews with you where you've talked about the importance of intersectionality in your institution, which is something that we don't always hear articulated. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how that commitment functions in your institution.

BC:

That language won't appear on the new website, but maybe it will appear in the footnotes.

AK:

Why change that language?

BC:

Intersectionality is a theoretical term and there must be other ways of expressing these ideas, although intersectionality still really important to us since we do not stand for identity politics. We are engaging with the complexity of the matters and the dynamics within, which is one of the reasons why we are dedicated to the commons paradigm. For instance, Yolande van der Heide, our Deputy Director—who is now a curator at our sibling institution, the Van Abbemuseum—is working on a study line called "Angry Letters." It's meant to decenter the oppressors with freedom and liberty. It's her interventionist engagement with the discourse and practice of the black struggle and decolonization work.

TN:

Having been at Casco now for over 10 years, what for you have been some of the biggest frustrations or challenges in the institution, and how have you seen those evolve over time?

BC:

Money?

AK:

Money!

BC:

Actually, it's not money. It's really not about money, and it's good to emphasize that. We have much less money this year, but maybe it's much better. Although we can't operate with "less" money continuously, the most important and challenging issue is I think the team, extended team, and ecosystem—let's say the organizing practice and labor relations. When we work on that well, that would strengthen the capacity to fundraise, give a reason to have money and spend money well. Of course, the lack of money might make this relational and organizational work difficult too. But the priorities and have to be made clear: not money, but people first. Otherwise,

more money comes with more authoritarianism—what’s the use of the money, and the “show” you make with that money?

AK:

We’re curious where you see yourself with regard to the institution—do you see yourself being at Casco for another 10 years and what do you see as the vision for Casco with or without you? What are your goals coming up—what are you excited about?

BC:

Whatever position I take in the future, I will remain part of Casco’s ecosystem and its communities. At this moment, there are a number of things that I and the team have begun and carried since 2018 with the launch of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons. We have been midwifing those ideas to be born and are taking care of those needing to be grown and are occupied with them until they become independent. I don’t know where I want to be in future institutionally, but I am sure I want to be where the nature–culture binary, one of the binaries that commoning intervenes to undo and reconnect, is maintained.
