Conversation with BLAKE SHELL, Disjecta Contemporary Art Center

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 / is for Institute website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA’s history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber (CHE’60) Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

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What is your role at Disjecta and how long have you been working there?

I'm the Executive Director at Disjecta, and I also function as the Artistic Director. I've been at Disjecta for just over two years.

Can you also tell me a little bit about your background before coming to Disjecta? Were you already working in the arts in Portland?

Yes, I've been in Portland for 11 years in various roles. I was at the Art Gym for almost four years both as the Executive Director and as Curator. I continued to curate as they were searching for the next director and curator there. That was my first full-time position as an executive director and curator. Prior to that, I had held a number of split positions in academic spaces where I was a curator and also adjunct faculty. I did that at the Archer Gallery at Clark College in Vancouver, WA and then before that at the University of Arizona School of Art Galleries in Tucson.

Great, and I read that you have an MFA as well?
Yes, an MFA in photography from Savannah College of Art and Design, which is where I began working with galleries. I worked with a number of non-profits before I went into academic spaces. I was planning on teaching, then volunteered for a gallery and ran it for a year in Savannah, GA which translated into non-profit work and split positions in academia. Eventually, it grew into this.

LM
Wonderful. How large is Disjecta as an organization relative to the other institutions where you’ve worked?

BS
I’m currently the only full-time employee. We have two part-time employees and some contracted workers who we work with regularly, but we’re definitely a lean organization in terms of staffing and our overall budget in light of what we present.

LM
Has the organization always had that lean structure?

BS
There have been full-time positions at other points. The staffing structure has changed a lot over the years, especially in the directorial transition. Our goal now is definitely to grow the number of full-time employees.

LM
Can you divulge a bit about how the name came about? We’ve been thinking a lot about the differences between “institute,” “organization,” and “center” and what those terms might mean to various spaces and what they signal to publics. Could you tell me what prompted that particular name?
“Disjecta” are the scattered fragments of culture—the idea being that we pull together scattered parts of arts and culture under one organization. I think that the legal name is “Disjecta Interdisciplinary Arts,” which was the original name when the organization became a non-profit in 2005.

We’ve gone through different models over the years. Bryan Suereth, the Founding Director of Disjecta, originally organized Disjecta’s programming across a few locations. Disjecta started with different “art parties” and had been around for a while before it officially became a non-profit in 2005. In 2008, it moved to this location on North Interstate Ave, and that’s when it really solidified as an organization.

Over the years, Disjecta created the two primary programs—the Curator-in-Residence program, which started in 2011, and the Portland Biennial, which had previously been at the Portland Art Museum for a number of years. Disjecta began hosting the Biennial in 2010. I’m not sure when the name changed to Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, but I think about the concept of “center” a lot in how I work strategically for the growth of Disjecta—bringing together its disparate parts and increasing the impact of this building. We have a very large square footage and we think about bringing in more under our roof to present more and support artists and curators. So, it’s a “center” in that it gathers together many different disciplines and activities.

LM
That’s interesting to hear because in her institutional history of PICA, Kristan Kennedy mentioned that PICA also began as a nomadic institution. Within Portland, that model seems to have had its strengths, given the flexibility to host programs in various neighborhoods. But now, as you say, it’s been consolidated, so I’m curious about this building as a site of centralization. Do you own this building?

BS
We have a long-term lease.
LM
What was the building before?
From what I understand, you're located in an industrial neighborhood in North Portland.

BS
We've heard different things about the building. There's a rumor that it was a bowling alley, but I don't think that's correct. We think it was a manufacturing warehouse, but there have been different narratives out there. Kenton was a company town, meaning that the company and housing for the employees were all located in Kenton. There was initially a meat packing company and the neighborhood grew to include other companies. Kenton is also very close to Vanport, which was an area of public housing for workers, over 40% of whom were African Americans and many of whom were left homeless after a flood in the 1940s. Kenton is racially diverse relative to the rest of Portland, and it's staying diverse at a time when many of the inner neighborhoods in Portland are rapidly declining in terms of racial diversity.

LM
That's an important history of this area, thank you. I find Disjecta's location interesting, as it's separate from the arts organizations downtown. I was curious about how Disjecta fit, or didn't fit, into the neighborhood here in Kenton in 2008. Have the demographics of the neighborhood shifted since Disjecta arrived?

BS
I wasn't working at Disjecta at that time, but I was in Portland and had friends who served in different roles at Disjecta, so I was around and observing from the sidelines. When Disjecta opened here, people were really surprised about how far north it was. It felt like the end of the MAX line to some, even though it wasn't. It felt so far to people and I think that's really been changing.

There are a number of issues that have been coming up as we've been talking about the number of closures of Portland visual arts organizations and academic galleries. Rent is one of the hardships for non-profits, but we pay lower rent, and Disjecta has made so many improvements to the building and we have a long-term lease. This is in addition to the fact that the city
is changing and people are moving further out from the center. I think that Disjecta has been a pretty great center for the Kenton community; it is the largest community space here. We’re a member of the Kenton Business Association and we host its annual fundraiser and auction. A few years back, there was a vote to have tiny houses for homeless women and children in the park, which was a huge deal. It was contested by a small group, but supported by a large group. About 400 people gathered for the vote through the Kenton Business Association and the Kenton Neighborhood Association and Disjecta is the only place that can house that many people, so it happened here. The mayor was here and there was a huge crowd. That sense of community is really important in this area and any neighborhood that’s further out from the center. We receive support from people who loan equipment to us, and in return, we loan our space to them. We provide space for free to some of the area’s nonprofits and do a lot of discounts for the organizations up here. I think that’s been a really positive thing for the neighborhood.

LM
It really helps to flesh out what your vision for a center really means within the community.
I’ll come back to thinking about the term “community” and how Disjecta interacts in practice, but I wanted to return to how the organization was founded—you mentioned the Curator-in-Residence program and the Portland Biennial. Could you tell me more about the Curator-in-Residence program?

BS
It came about in 2011. Prior to moving to this building, Disjecta didn’t have a core program and was in a number of different spaces, each with its own strengths. Getting the long-term lease here was a point of stabilization, and with the work of the staff and board, they developed the Curator-in-Residence program and decided to host the Portland Biennial. Those are the two core programs that have continued, in addition to Disjecta hosting a number of exhibitions and programming opportunities in collaboration with other organizations. We have a number of one-night or short-run events.
LM
What does your season look like here? Is it different every year depending on the curator?

BS
It’s different every year. The Curator-in-Residence is determined by an application process and the curator comes with a thesis in mind and examples of artists who they may work with—and that may change after they’re selected—but we really connect with the curators and with what they’re interested in doing with the space. Every other year, except this year when we skipped a year to do some internal equity work, the Biennial begins with the opposite procedure, where we invite a curator. This year we invited a team of three curators. There’s an application process for the artists. The curators visit the artists that they’re already interested in and then open the application process to artists they may not have been aware of previously.

Our next Curator-in-Residence, Justin Hoover, has an exciting series of exhibitions that will begin after the Biennial. The program will include queer and allied artists who are reimagining religious and mythical structures and providing alternative narratives.

LM
Can you tell me about this year’s iteration of the Portland Biennial?

BS
I’m really excited about this year’s model. We were looking to really change the Biennial in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion. One of the things that I’d been thinking about in equity and inclusion work is that we’re learning and growing, but that we need to utilize connections with people who have already been invested in this type of work. It’s a core part of what they’re interested in. We selected a trio of regional curators, and it’s been a number of years since we selected a curator that was regional. In the past, we’ve brought in outside curators, which has been very exciting, but this year it’s two Portland curators and one from Seattle.

One is Yaelle Amir from the Newspace Center for Photography; Newspace has since closed. Ashley Stull Meyers was at the Art Gym as the new Executive Director, but that recently closed. And then Elishaba Johnson is in Seattle and works for the city and curates her own space, Eunice Waymon Arts Services. She’s done amazing work there.

At Disjecta, we want to support curators as well as artists, and I think that there are a number of people who are amazing curators and don’t have a space to do that work right now. It was just an added benefit that we were
able to bring in some curators who don’t currently have an institutional home. But really, we selected them for the quality of curating that they’ve been doing and their focuses on social justice, equity, and deeply thoughtful work with marginalized communities.

They formed the core of their ideas around the concept of place. The Biennial is not only regional, but also Oregon-specific. It’s called the Portland Biennial, but it’s open to all Oregon artists, so they really wanted to think about what place means to these artists. We’re about to announce the artists and we’re really excited because it’s 2/3 women, and 2/3 people of color, and 5 out of the 18 are Indigenous artists. These numbers rose from a natural process of connecting with different communities, rather than a process of saying, “We want all people of color in this Biennial,” or something tokenizing. These curators also have the trust of different communities, so we had a number of artists apply because they knew that these curators would do a good job by them.

LM
That’s really wonderful. It’s also interesting that the Biennial used to be at the Portland Art Museum. How did the transition from the Portland Art Museum to Disjecta come about?

BS
The Portland Art Museum used to do the Biennial, but that changed over to the Contemporary Northwest Art Awards, so that became a different model with fewer artists and included a prize. That’s an interesting project in itself. I think that a number of people missed the Biennial and wanted to see it continue. In a very Disjecta fashion, we said, “We’ll do it!” Disjecta has been the type of place, with its staff and board, to see opportunities and just jump right in, even with limited resources, and make some really great things happen.

LM
Yes, it seems that you have the flexibility to do so. For your Curator-in-Residence, I think you had Michelle Grabner in the past and this season I saw all three shows—which were fantastic—by Suzy Halajian, who is based in L.A. with Basel Abbas
and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Sky Hopinka, Carolina Caycedo, and Dylan Mira. I’m curious—do the curators have autonomy over their shows and the artists they choose, or do they need board approval?

BS
Michelle Grabner was actually our past Biennial curator. Her Biennial was a really interesting concept because she took work out into the rural communities of Oregon. There was a big salon-style show of everyone she did a studio visit with at Disjecta, and then the artists that she selected showed all over the state. It was an interesting one to do.

The Curators-in-Residence have a lot of autonomy and are chosen for what they’re interested in doing. There’s been interest internally in asking the curators to look at the artists here and possibly include artists from Portland within their programming, but it’s not the focus. We’ve had international artists through the Curator-in-Residence program. That’s been really interesting to me because coming from the Art Gym, I’ve been very regionally-focused, and we’re going to increase some regional programming on the non-Biennial years as well. But it’s exciting because with the Curator-in-Residence program, we’re bringing in artists that the community might not otherwise get to see.

LM
Since you mentioned a board, are they a financial or advisory board?

BS
Both—they’re a fully-functioning board with annual giving and we have monthly meetings where we talk about all the different components of Disjecta. It’s grown from an advisory board to a full board. They aren’t involved with the curator’s choice of artists, but they are involved with budget approvals and the overall direction of the institution—everything from fundraising to what we can do with the building and programming—so I work closely with the board.

LM
What is your funding like here? Do you rely predominantly on grants or fundraising?
Both, and there’s some earned income as well. We don’t charge admission for exhibitions and we have partner programming where we might have a performance for a night or a band might come in. We have two different models for that: sometimes we split tickets, and sometimes they rent the space. That rental cost is lower for anything that’s arts and culture related or for any non-profit. We do have some private rentals, but the biggest component for us is grants. We’re working on increasing individual donations, and we have a number of dedicated donors, but we can grow in that regard as well as in sponsorships.

LM
What is your overall operating budget?

BS
It’s around $400,000, but it fluctuates—on biennial years, we can have up to around $500,000. Sometimes people will say, “Oh, Disjecta is such a lean organization,” and I always add the caveat, “For what we do.” Looking from the outside, I would’ve never guessed that Disjecta had this level of budget. There’s definitely room to grow, but I think that we do a lot with what we have.

LM
Definitely, and it shows that you’re thinking creatively in terms of the resources that you have. You also mentioned earlier that you host an auction. Does that raise revenue for operating costs?

BS
Yes, and we just had our 12th Annual Art Auction since this building opened. It’s our major fundraiser of the year and it’s been growing. This year was the largest auction we’ve had in fundraising, and we broke our record last year as well. It’s mostly regional artists, with some international artists and there’s both a live and silent auction. The silent auction has a lot of work; we’ve had as many as 70 artists in the auction. It generates a lot of support from the community.
Great. Staying on the topic of funding here, how do you address compensation for those external to the institution, such as guest curators and artists?

We are W.A.G.E-certified. Do you know W.A.G.E?

Yes—ICA Philadelphia just became W.A.G.E.-certified.

I'm a big advocate for W.A.G.E. The Art Gym was the first organization in Oregon to be W.A.G.E-certified when I was there. I had friends suggest that structure to me, since the Art Gym had been in the position of paying artists if there were grants. If there was a big grant, artists were compensated and they had their art production costs covered, but without a grant, they just had the opportunity to show. I really felt like the Art Gym had grown to a point where it was time to create some standards for all artists to be paid. I was looking for a way to develop that principle in practice, and someone suggested W.A.G.E to me and I was really excited. There are a number of organizations here now that are W.A.G.E-certified—c3:initiative, Yale Union, and I'm sure that there are others too. I loved that. Disjecta was the 50th organization in the nation to come on as W.A.G.E-certified. That was one of the first things that I wanted to work on when I came here. It’s a really important thing. We compensate most forms of culture but with visual arts, for whatever reason, the idea is that you’re getting exposure—congratulations. But actually, they’re contributing this amazing aspect to our cultural lives with incredible value. It’s a really important practice to pay the artists. Without this work, Disjecta wouldn’t be here—there wouldn’t be any reason for us to be.

I’m a big, big fan of W.A.G.E and I’m excited to hear that ICA Philadelphia has taken that on as well. I’m always a fan of giving people more, and we’re lean for what we do, but we are always looking to increase the funds that are available for artists and thinking about how we maximize what we have for them. A number of organizations share equipment with each other and put things on loan, so we try to do as much of that as well for the curators and artists. We could always do more.
I’m curious about some of the other internal parameters that might define a center. I think I know the answer to this, but just to be sure, does Disjecta have a collection?

We don’t.

Was that ever an interest or a part of the vision here?

Not that I know of. I’ve had people suggest that to me. It’s not my area of expertise or interest, and I’m not against that being a part of Disjecta in the future, but it hasn’t been the focus here, and it hasn’t been my focus in my career, or at least not so far.

Could be a part of some future course? I saw on your website that you have both a mission statement and a vision statement. The mission statement is: “Disjecta Contemporary Art Center builds ambitious programs that promote artists and engage communities.” And the vision statement is: “Disjecta provides a catalytic platform for forward-thinking work by visual and performing artists. Dynamic programs showcase new ideas and engage new audiences while fueling collaborations between artists, curators, and viewers to impact and intervene in the larger contemporary arts dialogue. Disjecta exacts equal rigor from local and national artists, while
recognizing and supporting the talent of the region.” I was curious—why the double model? Can you tell me a bit about the language as well?

BS

That all actually happened before me. I like the mission and vision statements, but the only thing we changed since I’ve come aboard is to put the word “curators” in; I think we just put it in the vision statement as well. I talked to the board about how the Curator-in-Residence program in particular, and working with so many outside curators for the Biennial, we really are in support of curatorial visions as well as artistic visions.

The language has been something that I really think about and when we’ve been on strategic board retreats, we talk about being a catalyst and risk-taking, as these things are core to the programming here. I also think that there are things that are not in the mission and vision statement that Disjecta has been doing this whole time, such as partnerships in programming and the aspects of community gathering in the center. I think at some point we’re going to revisit that language, since there are a few things to add.

LM

Do you have a set structure of programs here that you go back to seasonally, or, since you’re nimble, do you think of yourselves as more responsive?

BS

Both. We have ongoing partners that we have regular programming with—Friends of Noise is doing something with us, for example. They have a weekly concert. It’s an organization where youth can learn about the music industry. The Friends of Noise members put on concerts, but they also show how to set up the sound equipment and teach people about the production side of things. It’s a pretty great organization. They have various concerts weekly across the city, and we’re their north location every month. We also have the Portland Underground Film Festival annually and a number of partnerships ongoing that are annually, quarterly, and monthly, and we’re open to things that come up.

LM

Since you’ve mentioned all of these wonderful partners, I’m
curious, where does Disjecta see itself within the larger arts ecology of Portland? And then, who do you think of as your peers, either in terms of programming kinship or more in a conceptual sense?

BS

The arts ecology has been changing here, and it’s a difficult place for mid-level and smaller institutions. Portland has always had fluctuating artist-run and DIY organization levels. When I see spaces closing that have been open for a couple of years, usually I know that more will come up in the next couple of years. Right now, with nine major closures of academic and non-profit spaces, we’re seeing a real emptying of that middle ground. I’ve been thinking a lot about this in terms of what Disjecta provides and what we can increase. When we were looking at how we were going to grow and what we were going to do, I was thinking about how many spaces we’ve lost that are the next level—somebody wants to show in a cool garage space, or a pop-up space—those places are really important. But then, after that, where do artists go before they’re showing at top-tier funded spaces like the Portland Art Museum? The middle organizations are the most needed right now, and Disjecta not only needs to stick around because of that, we also need to grow.

We’re making a change now to have two spaces. One has been dedicated to performances, one-night events, or private rentals, and we’re also opening that up to exhibitions as well. We’ll have twice as many exhibitions in a year and that addition will be primarily regionally-focused. We’re thinking about how to support the arts community in that way, because, for the most part, Disjecta’s regional contribution has been the Biennial every other year. We’re thinking about mid-career retrospectives and curated group shows under an interesting theme with a mix of regional artists—sometimes that can really be in support of regional artists to put them in context with artists outside of the region. We’re also thinking about solo shows, especially thinking about the scale of Disjecta. Artists could show work here that they might not be able to in other spaces, whether that’s a chance to do something at this scale or at a different level of risk-taking because they typically need to show work that is for sale, or for artists that aren’t represented, who need opportunities.

I think that’s how we’re responding to this real shift in the arts ecology, and I’ve had a curator’s selection committee, which is an advisory committee. They’re helping to think through the Curators-in-Residence and the Biennial curators, broadening that selection to a programming committee, and making it a larger group. Instead of maybe meeting and reviewing all of the
applications, they’re really thinking about the larger-picture. There might be a working group that reviews applications and makes suggestions, but I really want to think about what Portland is losing, but also about what hasn’t Portland ever had, particularly in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion work? I’m not the person to speak to that, and I really think of other ways and other models of support. I have my own thoughts on solo shows, group shows, and mid-career retrospectives and all of that is important, but within this new committee process, I’ll learn other things that we can do. Opening the space up to longer-term projects in addition to the shorter-term projects is going to increase the exhibition opportunities for visual arts, which is the main focus of Disjecta.

LM
And this plan includes your Critical Impact Fundraiser? I’ve been seeing that online. Are there other components as well?

BS
Yes—we’re writing grants for all of this. We’ve already gotten additional support from the Ford Family Foundation, which is a big supporter of regional artists. Our first show where we’ll open up and have two shows at the same time is an Arvie Smith exhibition from the Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark that will shut down in May. That show was canceled as a result of the closure, and we talked to the curator, Linda Tesner, who had been there for about 20 years. The exhibition received Ford Foundation support in addition to support from the Portland Biennial, which is also supported by Ford. They typically fund one project per organization, so that’s a big vote of confidence by one of the largest regionally-focused foundations.

But I’m writing grants to a lot of different places. In addition to the GoFundMe part of the Critical Impact Fundraiser, I’d already raised over $10,000 through an interesting model actually, where a lot of artists and academics come together and give monthly. They’re able to give more monthly than they’re able to give in one lump sum. Giving $100 a month over a year is $1200, and that’s a large-level donor for Disjecta. People have really increased their giving because they understand that we’re growing and we need support so that we’re able to do all of this work. We have a good vote of confidence in quiet, steady fundraising, and then we have the GoFundMe as well.

LM
It’s fantastic that Disjecta is responding to its neighbors and
their current challenges. So often, especially with large funding bodies such as the NEA losing their funding, the competitive edge among organizations really comes out and keeps institutions from coming alongside one another. That’s not to say that you can keep them from closing, but here you are hosting a show that would not have happened otherwise.

**BS**

Yes, and I only wish that we could’ve brought on more from other spaces—this is the one that happened to work out. I had been in conversation with Ashley Stull Myers and we were thinking about having something from the Art Gym come here. We’d already planned to have the OCAC student exhibition here before it was announced that they were going to close.

**LM**

You mentioned some spaces that you’re working alongside and I’m wondering, who you think of as your peers on a conceptual level?

**BS**

Behind the scenes we’re supporting and supported by a number of organizations through equipment exchanges and more such as Yale Union, PICA, and Open Signal, Upfor and some of the other commercial galleries. We’re a part of Portland Art Focus, which is the non-profit side of Portland Art Dealers Association, so that community is really great to connect with. Also, Blue Sky is a great partner—I have regular conversations with their Executive Director Lisa DeGrace—we just talk about E.D. brainstorming and hardships and successes on a regular basis. I probably can’t name everybody, but that’s part of what I’m thinking about in bringing about this programming committee.

There are so many people who have been so generous with their time in thinking with me about the future of Disjecta, and they’re thinking about it not in terms of competition, but how we can work together. We are discussing different strengths that various organizations have and what the future could look like for Disjecta and all. Sometimes people think that Portland gets competitive with all of the different groups, but mostly it’s just that people
are very busy within their specific disciplines, so if someone is in performing arts, they might be focused on seeing all of the performing arts more than the visual arts. In my experience, when I reach out to people, they’re very excited to help and be in conversation.

I’m also the President of the Northwest Arts Council for the curator Grace Kook Anderson at the Portland Museum of Art. She is on our curator selection committee. Shir Ly Camin Grisanti from c3:initiative is also on our committee. c3:initiative is an organization that helps artists produce exhibitions, talks, get studio space, secure artist residencies, and more. For instance, they’ve partnered with us for housing for our Curator-in-Residence program from a few days to a month stay in advance of a show.

LM
I see, so they support the artistic production side of things.

BS
Yes, and we’ve been working together on programming together as well around our Curator-in-Residence program. c3:initiative also partnered with Pulp & Deckle for a paper-making residency, and now they’re a tenant of Disjecta. There are a lot of opportunities for sharing resources with each other and connecting through these different communities and that’s been a positive experience for my whole time here while I’ve been in Portland.

LM
That’s a nice segue into speaking a bit more about communities. We’ve been speaking a lot about communities—are these the same as your audience? Or are they two different entities for you?

BS
That’s a great question. I think our audience is potentially all of our communities, but maybe a bit broader. I think of them as circles growing outwards. We have the people who we’re working with directly and regularly, and they’re at the core. We support them and present their work, and then we have tenant spaces and partnerships and people who regularly attend or donate or give their time. We have a big volunteer base who helps us, and we also have people who come once a year for something. So, it grows outward in that way, and I would like us to continue to broaden those communities. But for me, that’s never to the detriment of the deep community that we’re supporting.
For example, we thought at one point about ticketing the exhibitions. On one hand, ticketing could give some stabilizing financial support, and even increase our perceived value. Sometimes people think that something they’re paying to see in a museum is more valuable than something they’re seeing for free in North Portland. We’ve had some really high caliber artists that could’ve received more attention. There could’ve been lines down the block for Sondra Perry. At the same time, we have people that come to everything and they wouldn’t be able to afford that. We’re trying to be more inclusive rather than less inclusive, so we’re not going to charge for exhibitions. Instead, we have a donation suggestion. We’re thinking through things like that. I would like for more and more people to come to Disjecta, but we do have a really strong community that we’ll continue to support.

LM
It’s great to hear that Disjecta is not simply being seduced by the numbers game. This question also leads me to ask about accessibility. It sounds like you’re thinking about this in a number of ways, but are there specific goals or strategic plans that you could share with me?

BS
I think it has to be a goal across the board. There are areas where we’re more limited in making changes because of funding, but we’re working on diversifying the board. We’ve come up with a new model of sponsored positions and minimum levels for annual giving in recent years. We don’t want to lose that income and support, but if someone isn’t paying, could they start to work as an advisory member rather than a voting member? We have one sponsored spot—and an artist of color is coming on board in June—and we have goals of making more slots like that.

Then, we’re thinking deeply about the programming as well. We don’t have the opportunity yet to have another staff position, but we are thinking about the contracted workers with whom we work, and whether we provide a space for them to produce something. We had an exchange with Ori Gallery, which amplifies trans and queer artists of color through community organizing, where they hosted a Biennial Q&A for artists that were interested in applying at their space. That’s a very open and trusted space for people to come and ask questions. We then gave them free space for their annual fundraiser at Disjecta.

We’re creating those exchanges and partnerships with the community—I think we can only do more of that and we’re only limited by finances and space, as well as our own understanding. We’re doing equity training as well. I was a part of the Regional Arts & Culture Council’s Art and Leadership cohort, which is really great—it’s six classes that are half days over six months on non-profit arts leadership. We had different topics each time and during the
diversity, equity, and inclusion day, Myles de Bastion, of CymaSpace, who is a deaf sound artist, spoke.

LM
Yes, he worked with PICA as well.

BS
He brought up that we weren’t talking about people with disabilities, but were only talking about racial inequality. Portland has not been doing well in that work for a long time and it’s well beyond time to make those changes. I think that we do have to think about the other marginalized communities that we’re not reaching. Myles is going to have a number of artists with disabilities come and advise Disjecta, very generously, about things that we could do to be more inclusive. We’re accessible—we have an ADA bathroom and things like that. But for us to create a list, we can do anything that is feasible with not much funding—but we can also make goals so we can begin to raise money. We’re not just saying, “We can’t do that, so we won’t do anything,” but instead, creating layers to the plan, saying “We can do this now, and we’ll work towards this later.”

LM
That’s really important work. You’ve mentioned a number of triumphs and future goals that you’re feeling really positive about, and one of the questions that we ask, because we’re aware of the many challenges of cultural labor, is what are some of the biggest frustrations that you might have? Is there anything that you might change if you had to do it again?

BS
That’s so hard. We had an event in the fall that was called out for cultural appropriation and we didn’t quite know how to handle it and still be in support of the artist and the chefs that were included in it and still be listening to the concerns. We made mistakes in that process, and now we’re getting more resources to learn about how to handle those kinds of controversies. So, I would definitely do that over—that was a big one for me. As for other things, I’m sure there are more, but you also have to recognize that you’re running a mile-a-minute in the institution, so I might be more forgiving for other
mistakes. But I just think I should’ve reached out for more resources at that time.

LM
It’s so easy also for us and for the public to forget that as an experimental kunsthalle, there are going to be mistakes—and that’s not to excuse them—but these are also growth opportunities as well. But that also brings up two more questions. We had a few other organizations that had a sole, full-time, staff member, and since you’re the sole representative of the institution, we’re wondering if a space like Disjecta could exist without you, since it’s built on your vision? Are you building it so that it can exist without you?

BS
That’s a really good question. The leadership transition was difficult and the founding director had not been thinking about that transition. I do, because I’ve moved to different spaces. I understand that as a founding director, it’s your baby and it’s what you grew from the beginning. Right now, I don’t think that Disjecta could exist without me. But the goal should be for it to be able to. I would like Disjecta to be stabilized and have grown to a point where it’ll be around for a long time so that whatever happens with me, Disjecta will continue. That’s a goal for me, especially as we consider the larger arts ecology of Portland. I don’t want to see all of this work go away if I moved or won the lottery, although I would give money to Disjecta for sure!

LM
And to conclude, what are you most excited about at Disjecta?

BS
I’m excited for the Biennial and this new change to have more exhibitions in the building—those are the two things. The Biennial starts in late August, and I can’t wait to see all the work come together, and to have more opportunities in the building. I’ve talked to you a lot about the support for the artists and
curators and then growing outward for the audience. We’re going to begin hosting First Saturdays with a show changeover in one space every time—each First Saturday, there’s an opportunity to see something new. It’s an opportunity to come up here and see a lot of different things. Carnation Contemporary, a tenant in our building, will have a new show every First Saturday. Pulp & Deckle had a paper-making workshop for the last reception that we had, so I’m going to see if they could open on First Saturdays.

It all goes back to that idea of a center. This space is a place for a number of different things and people can come for five or six different events—a performance out in the courtyard, or artwork in a different tenant space. I’m excited that we’re moving towards that. Disjecta is a wonderful space in North Portland that has been here for a long time, and it’s getting increasingly important because of this really radical shift in the arts community here. I feel extra dedicated at this point with renewed energy for all of us.