

Conversation with
BRIAN MCBAY and
JESSE MCKEE, 221A

I is for

Institute

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

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

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

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BRIAN MCBAY & JESSE MCKEE,
221A

Brian McBay is the Co-Founder and Executive Director, and Jesse McKee is the Head of Strategy at 221A, a Vancouver-based nonprofit that envisions a pluralistic society in which all people have the means to make and access culture, by working with artists and designers to research and develop social, cultural, and ecological infrastructure

With Alex Klein, Tausif Noor and Jessica Bao

BRIAN MCBAY:

My name is Brian McBay. I'm one of the co-founders and the current Director of 221A. As for the beginnings of the organization, this December will mark 14 years since a group of art students at Emily Carr University, myself included, started a small collective called NOART to express our frustrations with the institution.

I was trained as an industrial designer, and I've seen some of the changes and transitions of 221A through that lens. The idea of irreverence toward institutions has now presented itself in a circular way back to some of the early beginnings of 221A, which was about *artists who were studying* as opposed to students who were meant to put their lives on hiatus as they took part in a structured form of learning. We felt, even as young people, that we could produce culture, or have the power to be a part of society.

JESSE MCKEE:

I'm Jesse McKee. My title here at 221A is Head of Strategy, and under that, I'm responsible for the programing, the advancement, and the communications of the organization. I'm trained as a curator of contemporary art, and I've been at 221A for about four years. My work with 221A came after I worked for a larger multidisciplinary institution which had some major leadership problems and scandals. It just seemed like at that point there was a need for rethinking

institutional models, how they are organized, how they are funded, and how they re-distribute the value and knowledge they create. After I left that institution, I realized that working with peers my own age and a community of like-minded people was going to be a better fit than working within these legacy institutions that preceded us. I hope I'm not the only one thinking that.

ALEX KLEIN:

Was the Head of Strategy position always a part of the institution?

JM:

I was first hired as a curator, and when I arrived 221A was essentially a straight up nonprofit gallery. The Head of Strategy title came from the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, which we consider a peer institution. I asked a colleague at AAA, "How did you get your job title?" They explained to me that "curator" didn't exist in Cantonese, and that it didn't mean anything to anyone—not that I speak Cantonese here or in my role. But we were changing our model, and we weren't going to have a gallery or be managing an art collection, so why would I be called a curator, even if that was what I was trained to do?

TAUSIF NOOR:

I like that thinking. Out of curiosity, why is the space called 221A?

BM:

There's a kind of modernist gesture in the name, but really, it's just the address of our first location. There was this idea to not have much of an identity. In Vancouver, we begin our events and communications with an acknowledgement that we are on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations.

AK:

Was it always located where it is now?

BM:

Originally, there was no location per se. It was just a group of students at Emily Carr University, which back then was called Emily Carr Institute.

TN:

Can you tell us more about 221A's beginnings as a student-led initiative?

BM:

Back in 2005, there was an interest in the relationship between art and design, and myself and a group of about 14 other students were troubled by the individualism that was so common in art. We found that although design was very collaborative, there was also this 'peak-materialism' that was pushing designers to quit filling garbage dumps with useless things and instead design more meaningful experiences and even attempt to produce empathy. Designers were being encouraged to think about the provision of services in a manner similar to how artists were traditionally perceived as *givers of meaning*. A number of the students were in both art and design programs and in a small school, design and art are often seen as ideologically far apart: design is the right wing, and art is the left.

At a larger university, art and design tend to be grouped a little closer together, unless you go into marketing or something, which is another disturbing kind of world. There was an interest in overcoming these disciplinary divides, and in doing so, talking about power and economics.

AK:

Fourteen years is a pretty long time to be with an institution. Perhaps you can speak to how the organization may have changed—if it has—from its founding.

BM:

It went from being a student collective and an anti-institutional project to picking up the playbook of art galleries and carrying out some of the public vernacular of what a gallery is supposed to be. But at the time, the institution was living through that lie in order to satisfy some legitimacy. Then, we came around and asked ourselves, "Why are we adopting this bankrupt model?"

In Canada, there are thousands of small galleries and civic museums that are funded by the government. These galleries are mostly run by and for white people and are based on disturbing colonial models—so why were we picking this up at that time? Looking back, 221A is better described as a string of many small organizations preoccupied by similar questions, but with people who came and went—just like friendships. A number of the people who were involved in the founding were international students who were forced to

abruptly depart from Canada once their visas expired.

One of the people who was involved in our studio early on left to work for his father's irrigation company and now he's doing the irrigation for our outdoor public art site. We barely see each other, and I think he's kind of upset with me, but he did say, "Brian, you told me once that you only maintain friendships with people if you work with them because you have more time to see them." There's a passiveness to that type of friendship, and it's something I think that's come and gone within 221A. Maybe that's what you mean by institution—there's an abstractness to it that's beyond individual relations towards something collective but, hopefully not devoid of friendship. You've talked about institutions as people, ultimately, but here it's also very much codified. We are in the policy-writing stage of this institution right now.

AK:

Can you talk a little bit about that? I was very curious to hear more about your mission statement. Is it a relatively new mission, or has it been the same since the institution's founding? We're very interested in the way that language roots institution in an ethos and a place and communicates what the institution stands for to a public.

JM:

Our current mission statement isn't the founding mission statement—I don't even know if there was a founding mission statement. There might have been one written in our incorporation papers, something very general about charitable purposes to serve artists and our audiences and the encouragement of the arts or something like that. The mission statement that's currently on our website now about a "pluralistic society" would have come from the last strategic planning period in 2015, through the collective imagining of the staff, board, and consultants working together to figure out what our purpose was.

At that point, we were still a one-room art gallery, and we had just opened up our public art site, and there was one off-site studio building at that point. There was a sense that things could scale up or down, so I think that mission actually prepared us for how to scale intelligently and sensitively and appropriately for the community that we serve, and within the city that we live in. All cities are unique, but I think Vancouver is particularly complex and progressive in some ways in the North American context.

BM:

Our mission statement was intended to communicate that we lack adequate infrastructure. We then expanded our definition of infrastructure into cultural, ecological, and social infrastructures, which came out of initiatives led by Jesse and a few other people to think about how artists could transform systems and enact their research.

I can tell you that our board was quite concerned, because the mission seemed a bit slippery. But very quickly, what the mission revealed was that our organization is deeply contorted by funding structures because we are so oriented around the difference between capital funding and operating funding. I used to joke that we really want bridge-and-tunnel money, because I was sitting on public art juries—have you ever seen the budget for building a road?

AK:

I'm guessing it's very different from the one percent for art that they always tack onto buildings.

BM:

We also wanted to take that design industry language and apply it to art. We always had this idea that art had more space for design than design had for art.

TN:

That being said, one of the things that I really like about the website design is the degree of transparency that you have with regard to artist fees and the different roles that people have within the organization. Can you tell us about the activities of 221A programmatically? You mentioned that you're not currently working on exhibitions.

AK:

When did that shift happen?

JM:

The exhibitions in this room ended in 2017. Alex, you were probably here for the final exhibition as we were installing it, which was a commission of new work by Caroline Mesquita curated by Martha Kirszenbaum.

AK:

Right, I remember we all had dinner together that one night. Tausif and I were speaking with Luca Lo Pinto from Kunsthalle Wien, and he said, "What if institutions stop doing exhibitions? What would that look like?"

JM:

We aren't necessarily against exhibitions. As someone who's trained as a curator in contemporary art, working in photography, film, painting, sculptures and textiles, I'm not an anti-materialist by any means. I just think that it was the time and place and the context for the organization to move away from that. I think it's also a product of the art and design conversation that happens, which isn't that common in Canada. There aren't a lot of design exhibition spaces, and good and progressive design in the public realm isn't part of a discourse here. That was something that made us quite unique as an organization that would bridge the art and design communities.

Because of the funding structure in Canada, 221A drifted towards a contemporary art gallery model—that's what our arts council paid for. We wanted to re-initiate that conversation through a new programming model, which took some time to figure out. We went dormant for a period, which probably confused or angered some people, but we kept some people close, and had some good conversations for about a year.

What came out of those conversations, and what we have currently is a fellowship model where we nominate artists, designers, writers, and curators as Fellows. Depending on funding and the project they want to work on, their time can be anywhere from three months to about three years. The idea is that while you are a 221A Fellow, your research should look at how your practice can move into developing social, cultural, or ecological infrastructure. We use the word "infrastructure" openly, but essentially it should be something that persists after your time with 221A. At the close of the fellowship, hopefully something has sprouted that will give the community something to work with in the future. That can be a soft or hard infrastructure—it could be a public park or water fountain, but it could also be setting a legal precedent to help future cases in whatever your work is based on, or a new model for architecture or design practices. It could be a guidebook to recommend a change in practice for your discipline.

Thinking infrastructurally is what brought us to our current model. We're also just returning to ideas of creating and maintaining systems as a real priority for our generation to work on, rather than accepting the atomized

future that we are being told we have. How can we collectivize and look after things in new ways for ourselves and for the practices that will come out of this method of working and living? The idea is that our organization can only be as healthy as the communities that it engages with and serves, and so part of the infrastructure model is contributing to the health of the communities that we work with and serve. That will, in turn, make 221A a healthier organization in the long run.

AK:

It's interesting to think about the distinction between an exhibition, which implies a temporary condition, versus infrastructure, which hopefully is more permanent or rooted, as you said. It's not necessarily a distinction about whether it's art or not, but that it has a lasting functionality.

BM:

I think we purposely use "infrastructure" because it's a neoliberal term. They used to use the word "public works" in Canada to refer to the utilities that we all need to survive. We found that the deteriorating investment in appropriate public works and the movement toward public-private partnerships—having major corporations take on large scale projects that are beyond the tenure of most political parties—is increasingly the mode of governance in Canada. Our elected officials are able to commandeer a lot of public good into private banking apparatuses. How can we install ourselves as competitors in that space, in part to subvert it, and in part also to deliver some of those services in ways we think are more appropriate? In that way, we can also be a bit derisive of the scientific concepts of these things and assert that artists actually take part in questioning some of this work at the same time as it's being made.

TN:

As a concrete example, I'd love to hear a little bit about your research into blockchain technology. Blockchain is a digital system of recording transactions across a shared network that underpins emerging forms of finance and technology, like cryptocurrencies.

How does it pertain to the institution? The word that I'll throw into this mix alongside "infrastructure," speaking of neoliberal terminology, is "platform." I want to know both what you think of that word, as well as how it relates to the activities of 221A.

JM:

I don't want to try to define a platform, because that's a very complex thing, and I think we are still seeing how this plays out. What I can say is that I think what we're seeing in Canada is that platforms are able to bridge gaps in public service and that people are taking advantage of them. For instance, if you live in the north of Canada, where there's a territory governed by the Inuit people called Nunavut, it's amazing to watch this reterritorialization happen. It's been happening formally since the early 1990s. However, you still go to places in the north of Canada, and because people have been cut off from traditional lifestyles, diets, hunting and migrancy for food. When you factor in the history of colonialism with the global supply chain, it makes food very expensive when it goes that far north. If you order a head of butter lettuce, it's something like 25 CAD.

However, there's now a workaround: If you get an Amazon Prime membership for 8 CAD a month, you have free shipping for your food products. This is something that the government of Canada could never figure out. Amazon is not the most equitable company, but they're filling a gap for a population that is completely marginalized because of colonization. That's what I mean by the complexity of platforms—what they're able to do and what they provide. I don't have a future in mind about how platforms should be operating yet, let's wait to see where this three-year research project goes, but I think there are real problems in the way most popular platforms extract local value from tens of thousands of communities and deposit it on the west coast of the U.S.

I do think there is much gain in our practices from leaning into and working to design and enhance platforms, suggesting what they can be, how they operate, and the scope of who the platforms really serve, is something that a lot of people should be thinking about instead of just how the platform serves them. I do want to give a plug to some folks we're working with who are really prodding and pushing the critical conversation around platforms, and that's New Models, a pro-complexity media node with human-filtered content, led by Caroline Busta, Daniel Keller, and @lilinternet.

As for our blockchain project, it came at a time when the Trudeau government in Canada had put 90 million CAD into this digital strategy fund, which was specifically for our Arts Council. That's more cultural funding than

I, or anyone in my generation in Canada has seen in our careers. Blockchain is a technology that is growing, crashing and rebuilding. I was learning about it in Vancouver and through a residency in Hong Kong with a group called Things That Can Happen, which was initiated by Chantal Wong and Lee Kit. They weren't specifically working in blockchain, but I was in Hong Kong for a couple months and got to know that community there.

Anyway, this funding opportunity through the Trudeau government became open. It wasn't a grant for you to digitize your archive or make social media work or digital content, but really a chance for the Arts Council to come in and say, "Well, if you are going to scale your organization and move it in a digital ecosystem, how are you going to do this in an interesting way, or in a sustainable way, and in a way that provides for the community and the people around you?" It seemed like this was a place to look toward decentralization, distributing the power of peer to peer networks, and rethinking currency, rethinking economies, and rethinking value. This goes hand in hand with our infrastructural model. We don't really have an outcome per se for that project right now, and we are just half way through the first year of research.

What I can say about that project is that we are working with a cluster of researchers and people around the world who are interested in this stuff, not just from a technical angle, but also from a theoretical, social and historical angle. We are trying to distill a values-based policy around this technology, and how a para-public institution like 221A would incorporate it. I don't think we've seen that yet. We've seen a lot of talk around how banks and financial providers would want to work with this technology, or how libertarians want to work with this technology, but we haven't heard how public institutions are going to do this.

So, yes, we are an arts organization, but we also come at this as a nonprofit organization at large, and feel an urgent need to talk about how this technology can transform our work and what we can provide with it. From our first period of research, we're looking at a tagline of "re-commoning" land, data, and objects. That's a very broad scope, but basically the development projects that will come out of this research will look at ways to think about the distribution of land, data, and objects, and how to make private or hoarded ownership of those things less possible, and instead, make those resources more accessible to those who would like to use them.

AK:

I have about 50 different questions, but I want to make sure that I hit some of the basic things. How does funding work for your organization?

You mentioned being a public organization—what does that mean in Canada?

BM:

Our governance model is an independent, nonprofit, charitable organization registered in Canada. We have a board of nine people. About 50 percent of our funding is self-generated through the activities in our service buildings. We have three service buildings and we are opening a new one in November 2019.

AK:

Can you tell us a little bit about those buildings?

BM:

They are properties that we manage that are used specifically as artist studios and cultural venues. There are some cultural manufacturing activities, too, like furniture makers and framers and things like that. We have a new building that's opening in downtown Vancouver that's heavily subsidized by the government, and it provides space for artists.

AK:

These are all buildings that you own?

BM:

They are all on long-term leases.

AK:

And then you sublease them out, and make them into other kinds of spaces?

BM:

Yes.

JM:

There is usually a capital-raising period before we just sublease them. We will raise public capital funds, and then upgrade the building, apportion it into spaces for artists, as well as installing better fire safety systems, and fixing up the entrances and exits. That is also a public investment into the building.

BM:

As for our other sources of funding, we usually receive public-sector grants from the three levels of government in Canada—at the federal, province, and city level.

AK:

What is your general operating budget for the year?

BM:

This year it is 1.54 million CAD.

AK:

That's healthy. Because real estate and buildings are part of your model, I'm really curious to hear you reflect on your location. As in most cities these days, but especially Vancouver, gentrification is a very vibrant discussion we are all having. As the prices of real estate in Vancouver are skyrocketing, can you bring us a little bit into your on-the-ground context in Vancouver and in Chinatown specifically?

BM:

In Vancouver, gentrification is written into the DNA of urban planning. It's not really a symptom so much as a part of the deal that our government has set up in order to attract investment to the city. So, we have development and a formula to generate civic regulatory offset. As you mentioned with the one-percent-for-public art fund, we have a per-square-foot setup, and we have a variety of childcare facilities and other services as offset. Much of the formula or footprint of the city was designed that way in the 1980s, and it's only in the last 10–15 years that development has entered into existing neighborhoods.

With regards to this neighborhood, and maybe the footprint of 221A, some of it comes from personal history. My family had a restaurant in Chinatown from the 1940s to 1993, so they are deeply connected to the community. From our early thinking about this neighborhood, we were attracted to it because we felt we could contribute in a meaningful and positive way to the city, rather than buying into monocultural development in

other areas of the city. We felt that the rich history of a community subjected to state neglect, racism and basically de facto segregation, that blossomed out of a collective effort and social good was a great foundation for us to think through, even though this was the property nobody wanted. We've been part of the conversation about this neighborhood's renewal, and that comes with many layers. There is obviously a history of immigrant struggle, but there is also colonial history. And now, we're subject to global forces that have really shaped this neighborhood since the Olympics in 2010.

I meet regularly with Chinese elders who own some of the buildings in the neighborhood and city officials who are involved in trying to get UNESCO designation. I have an uncle who's a real estate agent and owns a bunch of the properties. It's an embedded network of entanglements—there are some deep social connections here, like the Chinese Benevolent Association, which are deeply rooted family clan associations. They're across North America, so you probably have something in Philly. One of our landlords is the Yee Fung Toy Society of Canada. To this day they meet for five-hour periods in the basement, with 30–40 representatives from five chapters across Canada. It's completely volunteer-run, and they have principles that they follow. It's interesting to see, because their purpose is ultimately for the survival of their family clan. There was somewhat of an obsolescence of these purposes during the 1970s and 1980s, when my mother's generation could move freely beyond the boundaries of Chinatown without feeling as intense of racism. So, there was this period where the Benevolent Associations were perceived as being dormant cultural fixtures, who played a social role for an aging population—playing mahjong and sharing food. But today, the Chinese Benevolent Associations suddenly have taken center stage, as they continue to provide low rental rates in the face of gentrification. And so, we are involved in conversations around how to move ahead with refurbishment of these properties without giving in to private market forces, and how to carry out some of the decommodification of land that they started many decades ago.

JM:

I think it's important to know, too, that a lot of these societies have been really resistant to development in the neighborhood. I mean, they own how many buildings in the neighborhood?

BM:

They own 12.

JM:

They own 12 buildings, within maybe a six-block radius. It's quite a big number. I think what's also important to learn from these Chinese Benevolent Societies

is that those clear principles and that collective management of these spaces have led to their security today, and their ability to say no to the speculation of gentrification. How do we learn from that? What can we as a generation do to make land not available for speculation, or property more communally accessible, for purposes greater than just profiting a landlord or a property management company?

AK:

How susceptible is 221A to those forces—or are you in a safe bubble?

JM:

We are not in a safe bubble.

BM:

221A started with student loans; it continues to be subject to whatever forces are out there. That comes to what you're getting at, I think, which is thinking about the longer term. Obviously, we are only part of someone else's bigger development timeline, and we only have a certain amount of agency within that timeline to really change things. How do we get out from under that, and build bigger collective alignment?

If you look on our website, there's another research project called the Cultural Land Trust Study. We've been researching the viability of a cultural land trust, which would buy and hold properties in perpetuity for cultural purposes. The idea is to take our model and succeed up into another kind of scale.

JESSICA BAO:

I'd like to return to the subject of your neighborhood and your audience for a moment. Chinatown seems to be a very close-knit community, but then there's the larger Vancouver audience. I was wondering if there's a difference in how you approach the Chinatown community as an audience versus the contemporary art community as an audience and as a whole in Vancouver.

JM:

Yes, I would say there's a big difference. We don't generally market or propose things to a Chinatown audience unless it's of context and it makes sense for them. The way that we work here is that we really let the project drive the communications. 221A has a mailing list, but we really try to develop working audiences around specific research and projects. That's also the other side of not really having an exhibitions program. What's more important with the fellowship model is that while it's good to fill seats at the events for the fellows' talks, meetings, discussions and workshops, what's more important is that that audience is able to contribute to the learning, research, development, and infrastructure. So, depending on the fellow's project, we will start looking at communities around the city and connecting to different groups. Instead of broadcasting, we think about it more like narrowcasting. We really try to target the people who would take this up and work with it, and be most purposeful in that work. And of course, if anybody else finds out about it along the way, they're more than welcome to join in and see where they fit into this.

We have a keyholder program, too, which is something that we basically learned from Artists Space when they opened their bookstore space closer to New York's Chinatown. We did a trip there in 2015, and we met with Richard Birkett, who mentioned that they let groups like Black Lives Matter or Occupy use the space after hours for whatever they needed. We decided that we should probably do that for ourselves here, especially after we renovated and had a library and a more accommodating space for groups. Sitting in a gallery can be intimidating for people who don't want to talk about art—maybe they are there to talk about something else.

BM:

Yes, it was uncomfortable. The floors were really cold and there was nowhere to sit. It actually just feels intimidating, just very uncomfortable, unless they install a nice piece of furniture.

JM:

The idea for the keyholder program is that groups who share some organizing values with 221A and can demonstrate a purpose and a need for this space could become keyholders. We're looking at rolling out a similar program at our public art site that has transitioned into a permaculture garden that was designed with plants indigenous to the Pacific Northwest by T'uy'tanat Cease Wyss. Cease is of Squamish, Stó:lo, Hawaiian, and Swiss descent. The Squamish and Stó:lo Nations are two of the of-territory First Nations that mainland British Columbia occupies. She has worked to re-wild the land with species that are indigenous to this bioregion, the Cascadian bioregion.

The purpose of the site is to be determined—it's like the adage, "If you build it, they will come."

We are trying to develop keyholders, and determine what will be of use to that space. Will it be for ethnobotany knowledge? Will it be space to work on indigenous language? Will it be a gathering space for conversations around gentrification and threats to the neighborhood? Housing? We are open to all of those possibilities at that site.

TN:

What is your staff size? How many people work at 221A, either full-time or part time?

BM:

Our full-time staff is between 8 and 10 people throughout the year, and some other part-time staff.

JM:

It shifts seasonally because we get student grants and early-career grants and have people on for specific periods—then their contract ends and we say goodbye. In terms of the staffing structure, there is Brian as Director, me as Head of Strategy, the Head of Facilities and Technical Services, a Head of Equity and Finance, and then we have some staff positions for administration, project coordination, and an education and learning programmer.

AK:

Is there still a relationship with Emily Carr University?

BM:

Yes—just recently. It’s circling back a bit, because we spent so many years challenging a lot of the way that the program is run. They just appointed a new President. I made friends with her and then, we asked her to join our board, and she said yes. It’s been like a soft power relationship there for years, because people’s spouses and people are supported by teaching there, and their artists, friends, whoever, go through those relationships. But now it’s maybe an opportunity to work together in a more directed way.

AK:

I get it.

JM:

I think on the research front, there is the leadership stuff, and we are also working with the research department in the graduate school with their Dean Steven Lam to try and plan some things as part of our blockchain research

to look at how art and design fit into this. We're asking how to get artists and designers at the tables where these platforms are being designed and developed, so that we are able to design equitable pathways in these things that are emerging. I think there was more of a soft power relationship for about a decade, and now it's looking at more of a leadership model about how the school can actually work with 221A in a more concrete way and learn from 221A as a way to instill this design and art teaching within everyday life, or to give students a sense of challenge about what's in front of them after leaving the academy.

Someone doing the programming at the University asked me to do crits with the grad students this year, and I had to turn it down, because I don't know what I'm going to tell the students coming out of the curriculum. I don't think my advice is going to complement their learning so much there. I think the kind of advice that we want to give or the kind of learning that we want to do is a very involved thing, and it's not something you are going to get out of just an afternoon crit. It's more of an ontological shift, really. I also think most art school curriculums are not designed for the world, climate and economy that's emerging out of the 20th century. We do have lots of interest and uptake from students in many disciplines however like Information Sciences, Political Science, Geography, Architecture, Engineering, Public Policy and Community Planning.

AK:

Maybe to that point, what can someone who walks into the 221A space expect? What does the arc of a month look like at 221A and how does one experience that shift away from an exhibition model?

BM:

This may sound a little uninviting, but experiencing 221A may be more like an optometrist's or a bookstore than a public library. Our library space intends to adopt the universal social value of libraries, but because it doesn't read right away as a fully publicly endorsed space (it is too small), and also doesn't necessarily read as a transactional space (there is no goods for sale), people are a bit confused. That's from a very pedestrian standpoint. You have to understand also that this neighborhood is so intense that most people who live in the neighborhood wouldn't have the leisure time to come here unless we paid them. A big part of our changing model is about paying people. Bizarre as it may sound, at times almost everyone that you see in the room at 221A will be paid by us. There are still people who come out of their enjoyment, but it's so hard to live here. I think you are getting into the

complications around how public value is made. It's similar to the way that you described our website—being able to stand in for those public values.

AK:

But even just the simple fact that you say, "We pay artists," really clearly on your website is big. I mean we do, too—we are the only W.A.G.E certified museum in the U.S., but that's a question that we like to ask everybody. It's very important, that idea of economic remuneration and not just cultural remuneration.

TN:

There's a lot of resistance to that in the U.S., and I'm curious if perhaps you can account for why that's less so the case in Canada.

JM:

I think it was part of a nation building project for Canada—which is still a colonial project—in the way that Canada set up its National Arts Council to oppose American and British influence on culture here. Lo and behold, we have this public funding structure that basically produces Canadian content, and Canadians are supposed to primarily consume Canadian content, though we are allowed to sample American and international flavors every now and then.

When it comes down to why we would be a bit more public facing, I just think the network that we are in for the artists-run centers is very unique in the world. I don't know that there are many countries that have a similar system—the Netherlands maybe. We didn't have a system that was based on commercial galleries, private collectors, or legacy state-run museum as the only major players. The artist-run center came out of that communal content dream of the 1950s and 1960s to let artists make work and make institutions in a new way. Of course, between the 1980s and the 2000s that system changed quite a lot, but I think essentially, we have a public orientation toward what culture should be here, rather than an individualist or private interest in what that culture should be.

AK:

I think many of the problems you can trace in U.S. institutions right now are the lack of public support for our institutions, which you can see playing out in recent events at the Whitney, for instance.

BM:

Right. And in terms of the territorial acknowledgements, I think here it's become a convention. Now it's upon us to do something beyond that, and even in the conversations around this Cultural Land Trust Study, we are debating whether the land trusts are fundamentally at odds with Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. Our city likes to say we view it as a nation-to-nation scenario, but our Prime Minister isn't meeting with the head of the Musqueam nation; usually it's an official from the city who's meeting with them. If we truly treated them like government bodies, I'd want to know what taxes I need to pay and how I should be afraid of their police, basically. Funnily enough, the city often abbreviates the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations as "MST". The abbreviation sounds like a tax.

AK:

Right.

JM:

Just on the land acknowledgement thing again, I want to share some words from one of the councilors of the Squamish nation, His name is Xelsilem (Khelsilem Rivers), and he has said that the territorial acknowledgement came out of the 1980s political and business communities. The Indigenous folks within those first started doing the acknowledgements then, and there was a lot of opposition in Vancouver whenever Indigenous leaders would do these at political and business events. It actually created an antagonism that was very progressive for the discourse and legal relationships between the communities. But now, 35 years on, the land acknowledgment is more of a tradition than a radical act. So, Xelsilem's challenge is that we need to start doing something new for this age that would be equivalent to the context of someone getting up at a business function in the 1980s and doing a territorial acknowledgement? We do them out of respect, and we do them because it's also good for visitors—every time someone visits, they learn from us about the history of these unceded territories.

AK:
Yes.

JM:

We have to look for other ways to be in solidarity with Indigenous groups, nations and people beyond the lip service of a territorial acknowledgement

TN:

There's that excellent piece by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, which asserts that you have to move from the linguistic to something more material to actually practice decolonization.

BM:

So, how do we do that? The land trust we are working on is having really hard legal and ontological conversations with people and that's how we are trying to provide other forms of solidarity.

AK:

What are your hopes for the future of the organization?

BM:

Well, I don't have a dream yet. My dream is that this fall we'll have been able to collect enough time to get into a dream. It has to be really collective. I'm sorry if that's not a showstopper, but if it's my dream, I can't leave.

AK:

Do you think 221A could exist without you?

BM:

Yes, I think so, at this point, so much as any small business or operation grows to scale.

AK:

That's a great answer.

JM:

We are going into strategic planning in the fall, if that's what that means.

AK:

Are the public-facing aspects of 221A free, or do you charge admission?

JM:

Everything we program is free to attend. We haven't charged for a thing. We don't have the staff, we don't have the infrastructure, and fees are a barrier. Like Brian said, we prefer to pay people to be here, rather than charge them to be here. That's the goal.

AK:

How do you choose the fellows?

JM:

We are in a pilot phase. Our first fellowship came out of something that we've known about for a long time—that's Amy Nugent's Sculpture Fund on our website. It's something that she's been working on for five years, but she's never been supported to do it. She's not a professional artist, but she works in arts fundraising and development. We worked together at the Western Front and the Banff Centre.

AK:

So, there isn't an official application process? It's more through relationships.

JM:

No, there is no official application process.

AK:

How many fellows do you imagine having at any given time?

JM:

The goal would be to have eight at any one time and provide each of them with at least a minimum annual payment so that they can feed themselves, have housing, get to and from work, visit the dentist, and have some leisure time. We haven't gotten there yet, but basically the salary level would be around 35,000 CAD per year, which is still nothing. And if we can add on top of that in terms of production funding or research funding with foundation grants or other project grants, we beef up the work.

AK:

It sounds like growth is going to be about, with your strategic planning, getting it to where you can have more fellows and be expansive in the communities that you are involved with in more robust ways, as opposed to a bigger building.

JM:

Yes, I think just to be better supported in what we do. We have confidence from the Federal Arts Council, which is great, but we are still working on the city, and we are still working on the province. The public seems to be on board and they seem to understand what we are doing now. The new website helps, so I'll share your comments with our website designer, Christy Nyiri. Our digital relaunch does a great job to put that operating model out there, which was confusing and hazy, but I think that's also something that institutions should probably be comfortable with, too. It's not always being so transparent or all-serving. I think there are certain times when you need a sense of opacity to re-plan, to renegotiate, and to think about the work at hand as the world around you is changing, because you just can't maintain your institutional model as a legacy to itself. The world shifts dramatically around you and, in those periods, you are not always going to be the voice of advice and you are not always going to be the voice of reason—no one institution can ever be that. Institutions have to be comfortable with going between different periods of capacity, and this falls back on the spectrum between opacity and transparency.
