

Conversation with
DEAN DADERKO,
Contemporary Arts
Museum Houston

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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DEAN DADERKO, Contemporary
Arts Museum Houston

Dean Daderko is Curator at the
Contemporary Arts Museum
Houston (CAMH).

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN:

How long have you been at the
Contemporary Arts Museum in
Houston, and what is your role
there?

DEAN DADERKO:

I've been Curator at CAMH for nearly 8 years.

AK:

I was surprised to learn recently
how early CAMH was founded.
Can you give us a short history of
the institution and an overview
of how it has evolved over the
years?

DD:

This year marks our 72nd anniversary, making CAMH one of the oldest
contemporary arts spaces in the United States along with ICA Boston, which
was founded the year before us. CAMH was founded in 1948 by a group of
individuals who had been involved in programming at the Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston who were interested in contemporary art. Contemporary art
for them meant artwork by living artists, but also, and importantly, the ways
one can live with art. In the very first exhibition they presented, called *This is
Contemporary Art* (1948), they included industrial designs like furniture and
utilitarian objects alongside paintings and sculptures.

AK:

Interesting. This is something that
strikes me when thinking about

ICA Boston and ICA London as well, in line with art historian Richard Meyer—how the contemporary was understood in 1948 versus now. It's very interesting to think about what that would've stood for.

DD:

I think it changes all the time. I just did an exhibition with Nicolas Moufarrege...

AK:

Which was a great show by the way. I wasn't really familiar with the work before seeing your show.

DD:

Thank you. CAMH has presented other exhibitions of works by deceased artists, like my former colleague Valerie Cassel Oliver's extraordinary Alvin Baltrap exhibition. Though these artists passed away decades ago, their work still feels vital and very fresh. For me, the contemporary has more to do with the ideas and the things that we're talking and thinking about today.

AK:

Would you say there is an underlying ethos to the artists CAMH works with and to your shows in general?

DD:

Recently, CAMH's stated mission was to present the best and most exciting artists working locally, nationally, and internationally. Now, "best" and "most exciting" are totally up for grabs. Ultimately, I feel like my mandate is to be looking at artists who are pushing discourse forward, thinking about things in a new way, challenging us, and even challenging the way I think. I hope viewers coming to CAMH might see something that changes the way that they think.

AK:

How long has CAMH been in its current location? Am I right to assume that it's not where you

started? What is the evolution of the architecture of your space?

DD:

You're correct. The organization was started in 1948, but they built their very first space, a kind of A-frame building, in 1955. The first director at that time was a woman by the name of Jermayne MacAgy, and she later went on to be involved with the Menil Collection. She was quite a special curator and someone who was really thinking about these issues, such as dialogue between self-taught artists and professionally schooled artists, decades before others were thinking about this. Although the discourse around how we talk about those sorts of things has changed quite a bit, she really strikes me as someone who was very much a visionary.

Our current building opened in 1972. It was designed by the architect Gunnar Birkerts, who passed away in 2017. He's also the architect of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. CAMH was the very first museum Birkerts designed. It's quite a dynamic space with a fairly rational structure—essentially a square of 100 feet on each side with a 22-foot ceiling. Rather than being a square, it's diamond-shaped, and you enter from one of the corners.

AK:

And you have two gallery spaces, correct? How many square feet do you have?

DD:

Upstairs, we're 8,300 square feet, and downstairs we're 3,700 square feet. The upstairs Brown Foundation Gallery has a wooden floor, white walls, and a ceiling with fully electrified trusses—we can hang things from it, and it's easy to black-box the space. We can admit natural light through three skylights that bounce light off of an overhang that acts as a ceiling above our entry lobby. Downstairs, CAMH's Nina & Michael Zilkha Gallery was formerly the administrative offices for the museum. In the 1980s, a small home adjacent to the museum went on the market and our board decided to purchase it to house our administrative offices. When the offices relocated, the downstairs gallery became a second exhibition space. The two galleries function on slightly separate schedules, since we present two exhibitions at a time. Generally, you'll walk in and be able to see two exhibitions; we stagger the openings so that if we happen to be installing in one gallery, the other will have something on view to avoid us going dark.

TAUSIF NOOR:

I'd love to know about your exhibition cycle. Do you have a set number of exhibitions that you do a year?

DD:

Our exhibitions are generally 13–16 weeks long. There are some that are occasionally shorter or longer, but that's really to accommodate the kind of flow that we're presenting. In our upstairs space we program three or four exhibitions per year and downstairs we do four or five.

AK:

Do you ever take over the whole building with one show?

DD:

Yes—for our 65th anniversary in 2013, we staged an exhibition called *Outside the Lines*, which was a series of six separate, but related painting shows that were installed in both galleries.

AK:

What is your staff size and how many curators are mounting these exhibitions?

DD:

Right now, we're three curators: Rebecca Malaton, who recently came to us from MOCA in Los Angeles, Patricia Restrepo as Associate Curator, and me. We do take traveling exhibitions, so sometimes we're acting as coordinating curators. We're a full staff of about 16 and our numbers almost double if we count gallery attendants. So, we're pretty lean and mean.

TN:

And, just for the record you're non-collecting as well?

DD:

We're non-collecting and have always been a non-collecting institution.

AK:

And free?

DD:

Yes, CAMH offers free admission, which is fantastic. It's one of the things that is most special about the environment in Houston: save for one of our institutional neighbors, most institutions here in Houston—including the Menil Collection, the Blaffer Art Museum, DiverseWorks, and Project Row Houses—are free and open to the public. There's a special story: I had a curator friend come by for a visit. It was a typical Saturday for us. The galleries were crowded, and my friend said, "You have the most incredible visitorship." I'm talking about diversity in terms of age, in what we assume is ethnicity, economic status, and these kinds of things. Interestingly, coming from one of the most diverse cities in the States, our visitorship feels representative. Since we've been free for more than 50 years, folks really seem to have taken ownership of culture, which is inspiring.

AK:

Right! I think we've been free for 20 years or so here at ICA, so we've got to catch up.

DD:

I think it really makes a difference. Valerie Cassel Oliver, our former Senior Curator, came to CAMH as a kid for art classes. So, when mom and dad have come here and grandma and grandpa have come here, the next generations develop a sense that this is really *their* museum.

AK:

That's wonderful.

DD:

People seem really enthusiastic about seeing new and even challenging work. We hear this all the time.

AK:

You started to talk a little bit about the amazing community you have in Houston. I'm always so impressed by how much good art there is when I visit. There's also the density of art venues, which you alluded to—you're so close to the Menil Collection, and you're right around the corner from the MFA Houston. You

also have the CORE Program in town, and you mentioned the Blaffer, and there's Project Row Houses too. There's a density of activity, which sometimes doesn't get remarked on enough, and I'm curious about your physical location in relationship to those other institutions, and then the larger arts ecology of Houston. Where does CAMH fit into that system?

DD:

One of the things that I think is most remarkable is how collegial my relationships with folks are at other institutions.

AK:

Oh, that's wonderful.

DD:

Before I arrived at CAMH, I was doing independent curatorial work in New York, and my experience was that institutions were more siloed. When I got here I immediately recognized and appreciated a sense of collaboration; folks were not all fighting for the same slice of pie. What feels like one of the most special things we have going in Houston is that people recognize that a rising tide lifts all ships. The ways that we help one another makes for a more interesting and diverse local arts ecology.

TN:

It seems like that institutional collegiality is something that the museum takes seriously in its mission and I wanted to address that. You have a series at CAMH called *Perspectives*. Can you tell us a little about that?

DD:

The *Perspectives* series started 25 years ago and it's changed over the years. It's no longer a specifically local program. The exhibitions are generally solo projects, but one of the projects that we've started doing recently that looks directly at our local communities is the occasional series *Right Here, Right*

Now. There was a great deal of interest when I came into the institution from the board and other community partners, who were asking, “Why don’t you do a biennial?” That was the last thing I wanted to do. I took the question differently, figuring that folks were interested in seeing more local programming, and proposed *Right Here, Right Now*, which takes place every year and a half or so.

The first exhibitions looked at Houston-based artists, and I worked with Bill Arning, our director at the time, and Valerie Cassel Oliver; each of us chose a Houston artist that had not yet exhibited in a museum. For the second iteration, *Right Here, Right Now: Volume 2*, each of us worked with individual artists who were stalwarts in the community. For the third iteration of the series, we took a geographic shift and looked to San Antonio. The show, which I curated, included 23 artists active nearby.

For me, the flexibility of this series is what’s really special. We could be thinking about *Right Here, Right Now: Video Installation*, or looking at performance. We could be thinking about Austin or Dallas, or even the Gulf Coast.

TN:

That’s such an interesting perspective on what local means, given the size of Texas. This leads me, in a roundabout way, to ask: Who is your audience at CAMH, and is that audience the same as your community?

DD:

The idea of audience for me is a really broad one. Audience is anyone walking through our doors, or anyone that’s receiving announcements about our exhibitions—regardless of whether they’re seeing them—in a very broad way. There are the folks who access our catalogues online—we make them available after two years, or when an edition sells out, whichever comes first. However, one hopes that audiences are going to see an exhibition in person. Through support from the Brown Foundation, we’ve been fortunate to be afforded funds to produce catalogues for each of our exhibitions. In that way, I think about our audience as anyone getting a deeper experience of our shows by picking up our scholarly publication. One thing that’s been very important to me is including documentation of the exhibitions in the catalogue. Which of course means that the catalogue can be finished up to a certain point, but then the design is finished and can be sent off to print after the exhibition can be documented.

AK:

We were blown away that you have all of your publications online. We had the staff size at ICA that you have currently when I started eight years ago, but we've grown since then and we still don't have the infrastructure to digitize all of our exhibition catalogues.

DD:

This is definitely a labor of love. It's a lot of work doing all this scanning. But it makes for a really rich resource, especially since many of our catalogues are out of print and quite sought after.

AK:

It's great. And if it's part of your publication process, that makes it a little easier, whereas we just feel like we're trying to catch up all of the time. If you have those arrangements with your authors going into it, that makes a big difference.

DD:

It's been fantastic. One of the things that's been really special is we sold out very quickly of the Nicolas Moufarrege catalogue, so it's really great to be in a moment where folks can access the catalogue PDF.

AK:

That exhibition is traveling to the Queens Museum, right? I was talking with their curator, Larissa Harris, and she was really excited about it.

DD:

Yes, we just finished installation plans, and we've been editing didactics. I'm particularly excited to work with her on the exhibition and with the team at the Queens Museum. The show will include the same works, so I can't split hairs too much, but I think it will feel quite different in the Queens iteration.

I'm really excited to see what it looks like.

AK:

You're currently in between directors, correct?

DD:

Yes, we are doing a search right now.*

AK:

What is that like in your day-to-day life? How long have you been without a director now?

DD:

It's been almost half a year, I suppose. Right now, I'm helping to take over some exhibitions that were left in the in-between space. I'm working on an exhibition that celebrates the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, and I'm also working with the artist Stephen Evans on a solo exhibition of his work. We've commissioned Julie Ault to write for the Evans catalogue.

AK:

How does funding work at CAMH? Do you have a financial board or it is more of an advisory board? Where does the money come from?

DD:

Like many institutions, we receive national, local, and philanthropic grants, and direct donations from our board. We also engage in fundraising efforts like our annual gala and art auction.

AK:

What is your operating budget?

DD:

Just over \$3 million.

AK:

That's helpful to know. For all intents and purposes, CAMH is a kunsthalle like we are, but you

* In December 2019, the Board of Trustees at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) announced today the appointment of Hesse McGraw as Director. McGraw comes to CAMH with a nearly twenty-year career in contemporary art, holding numerous domestic and international leadership and curatorial roles.

have “museum” in your name. I’m curious about the lineage of the name “Contemporary Arts Museum Houston,” and the way that it resonates for you. What does that language communicate to a public, and what does that mean internally?

DD:

In the most generic sense, a “museum” is a space most folks associate with looking at art and artifacts. I’m always thinking about how to facilitate *active* relationships with these objects, not passive ones. So, whether that’s directly being involved as an audience member—seeing a performance or participating in a socially-engaged artwork—or literally just looking at paintings, photography, or video, for me, it’s about activity and liveliness—about seeing the life and ideas that the works are proposing. These are things I get really excited about. We could go on for a really long time about these kinds of issues that are freighted with different nomenclatures, but for me it’s about keeping spectatorship vital and dynamic.

TN:

As a curator in a non-collecting institution, do you feel the weight of the museum’s history when you curate? Do you feel like you need to go back constantly, or do you have a different perspective where you’re just looking forward? I’d love to also talk about where your archives are located and your relationship to them.

AK:

We talk about our archive at ICA Philadelphia as a kind of collection, and the publications in the archive as a collection.

DD:

Until a short time ago, our archives were overseen by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and we’ve recently transferred them over to Rice University, which is

nearby. We have incredible colleagues in the libraries there and they've started to take very deep dives into the material. In fact, not so long ago, Patricia Restrepo, on the anniversary of CAMH's 70th birthday, did an exhibition called *Staged Environment: You Didn't Have to Be There* (2018) that really specifically looked at performance-related materials in our archives. I can't say that I feel so much pressure based on the programming that we've done in the past. I love and respect much of what we've done, but what I really recognize is how much CAMH has supported risk-taking, visionary programming. I like being part of this continuum. Part of this, for me, is that the contemporary is a very fluid and ever-changing field.

TN:
Right.

DD:

Lots of artists did their earliest museum shows here—including Mark Rothko, Julian Schnabel, and Cindy Sherman. Today, they're recognized artists. But nobody knew who those folks were when CAMH presented their early shows.

Ultimately, it's about trying to do the most interesting and engaging programming we can in the moment—knowing, of course, that there are times when we may mess up, or that an exhibition won't live up to an expectation I have for it. But failure is a part of what we do. You learn and move on. Risk-taking is vitally important in our constantly changing field, where even the idea of medium, or ideas that we have about how we present work, always evolve. It only makes sense that institutional structures would evolve with these changes.

AK:
We're curious about your individual perspective as a curator because you mentioned coming from this independent landscape in New York, which is very different than landing in an institution. I'm curious what that's afforded you and what you've given up. What were your feelings about diving into an institution, and the opportunities and compromises that we all have to make by working in institutional spaces?

DD:

When I took the job at CAMH in 2010, I was living in New York, where I'd been doing independent curatorial work. I was doing some teaching, I'd done curatorial residencies, and I was traveling a bit. It took a lot of hustle—I was very fortunate in that probably about 50% of the curatorial work I was doing in New York was for folks that came to me; the other 50% were opportunities I chased down. For someone doing independent curatorial work, this felt really good.

AK:

Totally.

DD:

Doing shows in far-flung places and at different galleries and museums, or for different non-profit institutions started to become tiring though, and I got excited thinking about what it might mean for me to take all of these stories that I was telling in lots of different places and centralize my efforts. So, it meant that I needed to figure out how to work with the exhibition spaces here at CAMH, but I find them quite exciting. They're definitely not white boxes, and that somehow enables an engagement with the space as well as with the artwork. I'm definitely a curator who enjoys thinking about how narratives unfold spatially and physically.

AK:

How far ahead do you plan?

DD:

It varies—a year, two years, sometimes three. We try to keep the schedule open enough to be responsive to timely opportunities and to allow for research and investigation. It feels incredibly rich to actually have that time to do research. When I was doing independent curating, I was fairly hands-on the entire time—I was my own development department, my own install crew, et cetera. It's really incredible now to be working with such a dedicated and talented group of folks. There's great harmony here with our team.

TN:

It was great to hear your ideas about what constitutes the contemporary, and one notion of the contemporary is also responding to social issues. With that in mind, I was interested in your recent exhibition, *Walls*

Turned Sideways (2018–19), which addressed contemporary social issues around the prison-industrial complex. You've mentioned that you now have more lead time as a curator for research, but has the exhibition schedule at CAMH allowed exhibitions that are perhaps more responsive to the political climate?

DD:

Definitely. The exhibition you're talking about was guest-curated by my dear friend Risa Puleo. Risa had been talking about the exhibition with me for maybe four or five years. It was definitely a long-term project. But when it started to solidify as an exhibition with a checklist, even if there were a lot of big wishes, I felt it was going to be a game-changer for audiences in a state where we're looking at the possible execution of a prisoner this evening.

TN:

Yes, I saw that.

DD:

We're also talking about a state where the prison-industrial complex is one of the top five businesses statewide. And, of course, a state that is really the center in not-so-exciting-a-way for the detainment of immigrants at the border. For all of those reasons and tons more, thinking about the ways of engagement with the criminal justice system is an especially important topic of dialogue here.

It felt vital to bring an exhibition like this to CAMH, to kick off a public dialogue. We have a really great education and public programs staff, and talking with folks who were on the front lines—who were giving tours to elementary school students, who were coming in by the busload—certain folks who were giving tours for us would talk about the fact that they've had relatives in prison. So, even just thinking about the fact that we could change minds and say, "Hey, this is something that happens to a lot of people, it's not something to be ashamed of, and in fact the only ways to institute change in the system, is to really understand it in a deeper way, and to become involved as citizens."

AK:

You've brought up so many things that we really want to talk about. Because you touched on the specificity of Texas, let's start there. Perhaps this also feeds into my own interest in asking about your move from New York, because there's kind of a stereotypical, coastal view of what Texas is. Yet Texas is almost its own country, with its own issues built into it. We saw in the most recent election that it came really close to turning blue, and we know that the demographics within the state are changing. It's a really vast and complex place, and we're interested in how you deal with language in your institution and the various sociopolitical issues raised by your locale.

DD:

I think one of the things that is really striking is certainly the size of the state. I can't tell you the amount of times that I get e-mails from folks and they say, "Hey, we're going to be in Texas for the Dallas Art Fair."

AK:

Which is four hours away.

DD:

That's like asking you guys to drive to West Virginia to see an exhibition—Dallas is 4.5 hours' drive away from here, and Marfa is 9.5 hours away! It's an incredibly huge state.

That said, people often think that it's a bit backwards. Before I moved here, I worried whether it'd be the homo-hating, Republican, gun-toting, racist, oil baron fantasyland peopled by extremely conservative folks; my lived experience is very much the opposite! Conservatism is certainly a reality here, but the reality is that in most of the larger cities, in Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, and certainly in Houston or some of what we've seen recently in El Paso, our cities are quite liberal. Houston is the most ethnically diverse city in the States,

according to the last census. We're also the fastest growing!

Houston is a cosmopolitan area, where one can find employment. It's still relatively affordable as well. Certainly, if you think about San Francisco, or New York, or Chicago, you can still live here much less expensively than any of those other cities.

One of the other things that's also really special is that three years ago, we started doing bilingual Spanish and English didactics. I'd been advocating for this, seeing as our city is majority Latinx. It seemed like a no-brainer. So, we've been doing that for all of our exhibition didactics for about three years now.

AK:

That's great. I think there's so much more to say about the political context of our country, not just Texas, in relation to the work that we're doing in our institutions. Because you brought up the rapid expansion of Houston, I wanted to talk about the major flooding that you had during Hurricane Harvey in 2017, but also more broadly how the environmental conditions of living in the Gulf have affected both your institution and you personally. These are issues that we're all talking about a lot more. It wasn't just Hurricane Sandy flooding Chelsea, right?

DD:

For sure. Well, you know one of the most direct anecdotes is that at the time that the flood happened in 2017, I was working on an exhibition, *Telepathic Improvisation* with a number of other colleagues, including Alhena Katsof, Lia Gangitano, Mason Leaver-Yap, and Vic Brooks. We facilitated works and a catalogue by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, and made a show that opened at PARTICIPANT, INC. and then traveled to us. The show was titled, *Everybody Talks About the Weather, We Don't*. After the flood, I was literally on the phone with them talking about whether we think that the work will be able to get here because of shipping. And I was like, "I don't think we can use that title anymore. We should change it." Certainly, in the aftermath of a flood, calling a show *Everybody Talks About the Weather*,

We Don't, would've seemed out of touch. So we changed it to *Telepathic Improvisation*—a reference to a Pauline Oliveros score that structured the performance that the artists presented on stage at EMPAC.

CAMH lost a major portion of its archives in a flood back in the 1970s, because they were stored in our basement space. So weather events like these are constantly happening. I guess we could also talk about how this state's relationship to the oil and gas industries. People are certainly talking about climate change and the ethics of funding here, and minds are starting to change. These are all big issues.

AK:

I'm sure some of your staff must have been affected on a really fundamental level. I know you had some housing issues. It must also affect the people that work in your institution on a really fundamental level.

DD:

Absolutely. I was without a home for almost three months. It was pretty brutal, but I also knew that I didn't have it nearly as bad as some of my neighbors. So, really seeing the changes that happened and the way that it seems like an old chestnut, but people were talking about the ways that people were coming together. That was an incredibly special thing to see, and for me to experience. So many people helped me out, and I'm really thankful. The power that artwork has to bring people together on that level, to bring people together to talk about things in a public way, is a really special thing to come out of a difficult situation.

AK:

Places for people to gather.

DD:

Absolutely.

AK:

I think a lot about the word "sustainability" with regard to the arts. We're all overworked and underpaid and overextended as individuals, so there is a question of the pressures

placed on individuals on the one hand, but then there's also the question of what's sustainable for institutions with regard to the amount of waste that goes into the art world—the heating, the cooling, the shipping, the storage. I'm curious how you think about those questions of sustainability, with regard to our current interest in collective and self-care, as well as the larger ecological questions, and where we'll be in 10 years' time.

DD:

I think these are questions that we're all thinking about. One of the things that we're doing that is quite special is that we have a really incredible preparator named Jeff Shore, who does the construction of all of our new spaces when we're doing build-outs in the galleries. He's become a real master of putting things together in ways that he can take them apart so that we can use the same two-by-fours multiple times, for instance. Certainly, they save us money, in terms of a bottom line for the budget, but it's no small shakes that they're also more sustainable practices, ecologically.

AK:

And on that more structural level, I think that when many of us join these institutions, we think about things that we can do in our everyday work lives for the people that work within our institutions, the people that we hope can work here, and the people that are shown. Now that you've been at CAMH for seven years, what are some of the strategic things that have been important to you within your work life and the external presentation of CAMH and what do you feel that you've been able to accomplish there? What are

some of your priorities?

DD:

Certainly, anyone who wants to get nerdy and down and dirty and talk about theory, I love it and welcome it. But I also know that it's just as important to introduce people who should be meeting each other or who I think should be meeting each other. I've had the good fortune of introducing artists to other colleagues here at other institutions and at my own institution who have then gone on to work together. For me, it comes down to real substance, and the idea that change can happen and it will happen whether I'm making it happen or someone else is. And I think, ultimately, that sense of being involved in a community of people who feel invested in and excited by the work that we're doing is something that I can't underestimate; I am fortunate to be a part of it, to be doing something that I love so deeply and making a living. And to be able to make, hopefully, some sense of difference for the folks that are seeing it.

AK:

That's great. And speaking of payment, do you pay artists at CAMH?

DD:

Hell yes.

AK:

Good, that's what we like to hear!

DD:

We're not on W.A.G.E. schedules, but we're getting there. And I have long been using the W.A.G.E. schedule. Did you know that I helped and enthused in the early days of W.A.G.E. being born?

AK:

Oh, no, I don't think I knew that.

DD:

Way, way back in the day. Their phrase, "We Demand Payment for Making the World More Interesting"—

AK:

That's your tag line!

TN:

It's a great one. We're curious about what institutions, historical or otherwise you see CAMH aligned with. This could be in terms of mission or an artist that you've worked with, but who do you consider your peers?

DD:

Collegially, I've got lots of peers whose work I love and respect, and they're at institutions all over the place, and at many scales. I have a great deal of respect for ICA Philadelphia, ICA LA, and Kunsthalle Basel, for instance. Ultimately, I feel most inspired by the substantive relationships I share with artists and colleagues.

AK:

It's the conversations we're having now.

DD:

Exactly. These are the things that really drive me. I get excited by the programming that's happening at other institutions, but ultimately if we trace that back, it's always being generated by someone or by a group of folks that are coming together. So, I feel a bit less invested in the notion of a particular space, and more invested in the notion that it's people that make a space vital and important. Certainly, the space can come to be seen as emblematic of certain energies for the communities of people around it over time, and that's really exciting. But, as you were alluding to before, when new groups of people and new voices come into the institution, institutions change. So, for me, it's thinking about the direct relationships I have first with artists and then with other colleagues who might be just as excited about certain ideas as I am.

TN:

We hope that this project, in some way, mirrors that thought. In having these conversations with people within these institutions, we're trying to highlight the intellectual labor involved in producing exhibitions, events, and programs,

and underscore the fact that institutions are made of people.

AK:

And to also make the work we do more transparent. It's definitely nerdy; we're talking shop and really enjoying it. But it's also about lifting the veil a little bit and talking about how decisions are made. These are the structures that you're working in, these are the things you're responding to, these are your priorities—the things that don't get out into the world enough. We want to make institutions a little less opaque.

DD:

Some curators would have you think that their work is brain surgery, but often times I find it's a bit simpler and a bit more affective than that. We're thinking about things we're moved by, whether we're thinking about artists that are overlooked, like the Ree Morton show at ICA Philadelphia. It's really incredible to have those energies brought back into our moment. She's certainly a great example of a non-contemporary/contemporary artist, but ultimately, it's in the triangulation of the artwork, the institution, and the public where things really get exciting.

AK:

I have so many more questions, but we always like to wrap up with thinking about what you're more excited about going forward. We all have challenges in our day-to-day work, but what's lighting you on fire at the

moment? What's getting you out of bed in the morning?

DD:

Right now, I'm working on an exhibition that celebrates the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. It's an exhibition that's evolved a great deal since the institution took it on and when I took it over as curator. I'm really excited about the dialogue that I'm anticipating this exhibition is going to generate. We're working with a group of local, national, and international artists. It's a show, that, like my own trajectory, doesn't exactly follow the rules. It doesn't try to purport that there's a single thread that unites everything. There will certainly be frictions among objects that are being seen near and alongside each other, and ultimately, I think one of the most important things was a development of intergenerational dialogue within the exhibition, looking at issues around trans-visibility, and looking at queer production outside of the United States. Those are the components that I wanted to braid together for this exhibition.

AK:

That actually seems like a wonderful place to end. It resonates with everything you've been talking about with the contemporary as not just what's being made right now, but how it resonates; looking at historical moments that have a contemporaneity to them; thinking about the complexity of them within our contemporary sphere in a way that they might not have been articulated in the moment that they were produced. And it sounds very much in keeping with how you're dealing with this project.

DD:

And staying fluid.
