

Conversation with
EVA RESPINI AND
RUTH ERICKSON,
ICA Boston

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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Eva Respini is the Barbara Lee Chief Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Ruth Erickson is the Mannion Family Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

What are your roles in the institution, and how long have you been at ICA Boston?

EVA RESPINI

I'm the Barbara Lee Chief Curator, and I've been at the ICA for three years.

RUTH ERICKSON

I'm the Mannion Family Curator, and I have been here since 2014.

AK

Could you give us a little bit of background on the ICA Boston? What year was it founded? And from there, maybe we can transition into a conversation about the renaming of the ICA.

ER

We were founded in 1936, and when we were founded we were the Boston Museum of Modern Art. We were a sister institution to New York's MoMA. It was conceived of as a laboratory of sorts with innovative approaches to art where contemporary art, or the art of our time, which is the phrase that was really used then, could be championed. Eventually, the Boston Museum of Modern Art parted ways with MoMA, and we were renamed in 1948 as the Institute of Contemporary Art.

In that time period we've had, I think, 13 different locations. We were quite peripatetic with locations all over Boston. Then in 2006, as you know, we built our current Diller Scofidio + Renfro building. At that point, we became a collecting institution.

AK

I'm curious about that shift. Obviously, neither of you were there at the time, but do you have some insight into the decision to become a collecting institution?

ER

There was a real sense of wanting to give some permanency to the museum, and especially because the museum had been somewhat itinerant in various locations throughout the city. The new building would give it some permanency, but a collection could really augment that as well. I think there was a desire to create context for the temporary exhibition program, and that a collection could provide a historical context for contemporary art. So, when the decision was made to become a collecting institution in 2006 with the new building, it was seeded by a series of promised gifts of art.

Initially it was determined that only artists showing at the ICA would be collected by the ICA Boston. This came after many discussions about if we had collected one work of art from every show since 1936 when we were founded we would have an amazing collection. If you look back at our history there have been some significant exhibitions that have been done here and artists who have had major early support from the ICA or early exposure at the ICA. In 2011, that collection policy was changed to broaden the purview of the collection to collect beyond our exhibitions. But I would say that primarily we are guided by our exhibition program. I think people still know us as a kunsthalle. I think there are still people who do not realize we are a collecting institution, though I think that is changing a little bit. But I would say our main bread and butter continues to be the temporary exhibition program. And I think over time we will see that the collection will have more and more strength, and it will have more and more of a presence within the exhibition program.

AK

Is that a goal of yours to try to acquire works out of exhibitions? Is that something that you try to do on a regular basis?

ER

Yes. We do it pretty regularly; I would say every year. I don't know. What do you think, Ruth? Half of our acquisitions are based on exhibiting artists?

RE

I think that's about right.

TAUSIF NOOR

Is the collection stored on-site, or are there other storage locations for the collection?

ER

It is stored off-site. As you may know, we are right on the water on the Boston Harbor, and so while our galleries are at a significant distance from the water, we feel it's prudent not to store art on-site so close to the water.

AK

That makes sense. I'm curious how the term "contemporary" has shifted for you in the life of your institution, because that shift from modern to contemporary is quite stark, especially in 1948. That seems very early. I'm curious how the contemporary resonates for you in your institution and maybe how that's shifted over the years.

RE

One thing to point to is Richard Meyer's book, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, which did a really amazing job in laying out the history. One of the things that he signals both with the word "institute" and "the contemporary," is the ways in which the shift of terminology signaled an embrace of a more hybrid program, and one that was interested in technology. I think locating both hybridity of practices—so an exhibition of plastics for instance—and the embrace of new technologies and new media is what led to that shift in 1948. I think he lays out a very good argument in thinking about the history of "the contemporary" and the ways in which it shifts over time.

But I even feel at our own moment that if I think about what is "contemporary" — if it's something you're kind of contemporaneous with or

parallel with—it feels like it is shifting because you're in proximity to it. You're in a relation to it. But I still think of hybridity and technology as being at the core of what I would describe as our contemporary moment. Meyer identified those as the core in 1948 as well.

AK

I'm glad you brought that up. I was actually just rereading his book. I'd like to know more about how you both approach the program at ICA Boston. Eva, coming in when you did, what was your vision for the direction you wanted to take the team? Ruth, I'd also love your insight into the shifts that have taken place during your time at ICA.

ER

For me, I see the program very holistically, and that has to do very much with our architecture. Our visitors see all our shows in one go, similar to ICA Philadelphia, which was not the situation in my previous institution [the Museum of Modern Art], or at a larger institution like the Met. At most encyclopedic institutions, you cannot assume that visitors will see everything in one go, but that is absolutely the case in our institution. I think about exhibitions in proximity to each other, of what works together and of juxtapositions. I seek a real balance and diversity in terms of the kind of artists who are shown in our program, what medium they work in, the subject matter, whether they are emerging or more established, or perhaps older but overlooked, and the balance between group shows and solo presentations. When I look at building the program, I think of it within each season. I try to emphasize relationships by building off narratives that exist in our program and also make sure that there is a variety of offerings on view.

When I came in, there were a couple of things I thought about in particular with the program at ICA Boston. Being responsive to the resonant issues of the day is in the DNA of the ICA. If you look back at our history, we showed *Guernica* in 1940, which is pretty incredible to think of—this being during World War II—this very anti-war canvas and also this very forward-thinking presentation. For me, it is knowing that this happened very early in our history, and to more recent things such as showing Mapplethorpe in the 1990s. So, I feel that our program has always been responsive to the major issues of the day: social and political topics and dialogues.

I think that is something you'll see is present in our program now, and

something that I, along with the curators, think about very deeply. The other thing that I really thought a lot about when I started was how to be a more global museum. I think any museum in the 21st century really has to think beyond U.S., North American, and Western European purviews. I felt that the prior program was pretty American-centric, and so I made a concerted effort to be more global in my programming—you know, everyone from Walid Raad to Nalini Malani, and also in acquisitions.

But I will say that global purview is difficult when you're a small to mid-sized museum. We have shipping from Dubai or from Seoul. It can be prohibitive when you are looking at a first solo exhibition of an artist in the US. We've exhibited a fair amount of artists that are from the Global South or from other areas that are not as predominantly North American or Western European centers. That is something that I continue to seek to do in our program. But I will say I and the other curators have talked a lot about how challenging that actually is.

Finally, I would say that I think what differentiates the program under my purview is a concerted look at technology, moving image, and the digital arena, more than it had been in the program previously. That really stems from my own interests and expertise in terms of where I came from curatorially. I think we've been doing a lot of that, and even in our acquisition program by acquiring major video works or to represent, in my view, the best of this newish medium that I believe is the medium of our time. I think moving images are how people see things.

AK

You were talking about wanting to participate in a global conversation, but hitting the wall with some financial realities. What is the operating budget of the institution?

ER

We're at \$15 million.

AK

That's pretty big. What is your staff size?

ER

That's a good question. Total staff, I want to say something like 65 or 67 full-time, permanent employees. Ruth is that right?

RE

Yes, I think so.

RE

With temporary employees and visitor assistants, I think it's over 100, maybe 115.

AK

How many curatorial staff do you have?

ER

We're 12 full-time in curatorial including myself. I oversee registration as well. So, the registrar and preparators are under the purview of curatorial. And we're currently five curators—five people who create programming.

AK

There's also a director—how involved is she in the programmatic aspects of what you do? Do you have autonomy as the curatorial department, or is it a negotiation?

ER

I would say it is a conversation more than a negotiation. She does have purview over the entire program, not just the visual arts, but also the performing arts and the educational programming. I would say within those conversations I have a fair amount of autonomy. I feel that the program is very much mine.

AK

That's great.

ER

But it's always a conversation.

AK

Of course. Returning to this question of an "institute," Ruth, I'm curious to hear your thoughts on what an institute means to you also with regard to some of the things that you've worked

on within an exhibition format from Black Mountain College to your work on childhood. Here in Philly, in terms of the “institute” in ICA, the word “institute” has a different lineage for us than it might be for you because we’re connected to a university. I’m curious how that word resonates in your context.

RE

For me, “institute” encompasses what I most love about this size of museum in that it signals multiple arms. I think the purview of the collection and what happens in our galleries is obviously where curatorial is most directly involved, but it’s just one component of the ICA as a whole. For me it’s a more egalitarian term than “museum” and encompasses education and programs. We have an amazing teen program. There’s a teen new media and video lab. There’s space where art-making activities happen. There’s a bookstore. To me, “institute” is a bit more equipped for contemporary art than “museum,” which I think I associate more with this caretaking and narrating of history. I think that “institute” is very forward thinking in addressing all of those different platforms that a museum supports and activates and invites visitors to engage with.

As far as my projects, thinking back to Black Mountain College — a certain model of a liberal arts college — and then thinking forward to the project around childhood that is really very interdisciplinary, activating each of those arms of the ICA has been really important to me. In all of the projects that I do here, I’m making sure that I create opportunities for the different arms of the ICA to be involved with the curatorial program. That has been very energizing for me as a curator.

To add on to what Eva was saying, one of the other things that we talk a lot about, and is really in the DNA of the ICA, is there have been so many artists to whom we’ve offered a first museum show. That sense of a balance between the emerging, mid-career, and established, as well as between solo shows and group shows is something that we talk about a lot. I think what we do really well is that we have a platform where we don’t do just one kind of show. Our architectural spaces are equipped to do different kinds of shows for different kinds of artists, depending upon what they need at that point in their lives. Ultimately, for me, it’s the balance of the exhibitions and activities that are taking place under the same roof. It’s allowing curatorial to be a leader in the vision of the institution, while also acknowledging the centrality of all those other departments and people.

ER

What Ruth says is absolutely right: the first solo show, or first survey, is our bread and butter. I think it's what we do well, and that also goes along with the first publication, or first survey-like publication. The one thing that I think has changed, and this is really due to my predecessor, Helen Molesworth, is that we increasingly—and we try to do this now at a steady beat of every two years—have been doing historical shows. This started with Black Mountain College. These exhibitions have a kind of intellectual rigor that really aims to contribute to the scholarly material on that subject or aims to kind of lead in many ways. I think that was maybe not so much a part of the profile of the ICA until Helen arrived. Black Mountain College was a show that focused on a historical period, and the question we have to ask ourselves is why is the ICA doing this show? We really felt that it was because it spoke so much to contemporary issues. The idea of the interdisciplinarity that we saw at Black Mountain College, to us, felt that it informed our contemporary moment.

I think that really was a change, and I would say that the word "institute" and its pedagogical applications with Black Mountain College felt like a natural fit. So, we have started doing more and more shows that are more historical in their scope. Not every show. We can't do that in terms of the time and the research and the resources, and also, we want to be a very forward-thinking institution as well. Jenelle Porter's fiber show looked at the 1960s to the present. My internet show attempted a historical look, with 1989 not being so long ago. Then, what Ruth just mentioned was this project she's working on about childhood, going back to the early part of the 20th century to the very present. So, for me, these larger research projects that reach back in time feel like a natural fit with the word "institute" and was a moment when we were really considering our role vis-à-vis historical material.

TN

What's also interesting about the ICA is its location within the city of Boston, and when you cross over into Cambridge, there are so many university-associated museums like The Fogg. This is a two part-question. How would you think about the ICA and its ecology within the Boston area? And then, who would you say are your conceptual peers that might not necessarily be in Boston? That can be speaking historically as well.

ER

We are the only institution in Boston that is entirely dedicated to contemporary art that is not a university museum. So, The MIT List Visual Arts Center, which is a great peer, does only contemporary or largely contemporary like us, but has the context of a university. I think for us it's important to have that niche. We don't exactly have a peer within Boston. That being said, I think the landscape of Boston is one where we're really rich in institutions. We're really rich in museums and the landscape of museums is excellent. From the Harvard Art Museums to the Museum of Fine Arts, to the Rose and the List, these are the places that we look to the most, and we are quite collegial with other curators in town.

AK

I've heard about those legendary
Tuesday drink nights.

ER

Everyone sort of has their role and feels invested in the place and context that they're in. That being said, I wish there was more contemporary. I wish some of the other museums would do more contemporary programming, and I think that's coming. We've seen this increasingly with the MFA. I think they are going to do more with a new hire that they've just made. The Harvard Art Museums with their newly renovated building is paying attention to contemporary somewhat, but if there was even more of it, I think that could be great for us and for Boston.

AK

Is there much dialogue with
MASS MoCA? I know that's a
little further away.

ER

It's interesting. MASS MoCA is far enough away that it doesn't feel like it's within our local context. That being said, if an artist has had a solo show at MASS MoCA, we might think twice about having a solo presentation here because it is still in our same state. Certainly, we're very collegial with them, but it feels a little bit outside of our local context. I would lump them more with New York museums, and we talk a lot about whether we should take shows from New York museums. We currently have a traveling show from the Brooklyn Museum. Sometimes it feels like we are too close in terms of press coverage. Other times our audiences are so different, and we find that people in Boston aren't going down to New York to see these shows. So, there is value in bringing them here.

In terms of the last part of that question about peers, and I'm curious what Ruth might say, but I see our closest peers as MCA Chicago and the Hammer, as well as slightly larger institutions that I feel we have an affinity with in terms of programming like the Walker Art Center, because they have performing arts in the same way that we do. Then, to a certain extent the Whitney, although now in their new iteration, they feel like a much larger institution than they used to. But there's a lot of shared interest in terms of programming with them and those other museums.

RE

We often talk about those institutions that Eva just listed when we look into touring shows and taking shows. I think all of those institutions are also at least one measure of a scale bigger than us as far as their operating income and their staff. Other institutions, I would include are the ICA Philadelphia, the Pérez Art Museum, and CAM St. Louis.

The ICA is in this middle ground between operating budget and reputation, and then just the sheer people within curatorial that are populating and doing all of this work. When one of our exhibitions travels or something like that, it's a huge amount of work for us. It's a stretch for our institution because we literally have two registrars on staff. I often turn to colleagues working at the CAM St. Louis or ICA Philadelphia, which are all slightly smaller than the ICA, because there's a real symbiosis between the day-to-day labor.

AK

At ICA Philadelphia, we think of ourselves like an accordion. I feel like sometimes we expand during touring shows with MCA Chicago, and sometimes we think of ourselves in dialogue with smaller institutions like The Renaissance Society. It's an expansive and contracting model of relationality. But I wanted to talk about audience, because you were talking a bit about your community in Boston, and I'm curious about the physical location of the building and if you could talk a bit about the recent opening of the Watershed. Who do you think of as your audience and do you think that is the same thing as your community?

ER

The opening of the Watershed came out of a couple of different conversations and desires, some of them about audience, and actually audience building. But the primary reason we decided to open the Watershed is that almost from the day that we opened our building in the Seaport, we heard from our visitors that they wanted to see more art. One of the things I love about the ICA is its intimate scale. You can see everything in one afternoon, and it's not so cavernous. You're not getting lost in a maze of galleries, yet people wanted more. In a way, maybe that's due to the success of the program that people wanted to see more art, so there have been several conversations about expansion opportunities that preceded when I came. But when I arrived, the conversation was really about a different model of expansion that wasn't the typical expansion that we're seeing with a huge capital campaign because in a way, we'd just gone through a capital campaign by building a new building.

This new model of expansion, I think, is really unique. We are thinking about what facets are unique to the ICA. One is that we are facing the water, and we are perched, literally, on the Boston Harbor and really utilizing the Boston Harbor as our front yard. If you've been to the ICA recently, you'd know the rest of the neighborhood is being developed around us. Quite literally, we're being enclosed by much taller buildings.

AK

It's impossible to find parking.

ER

It's better now though, actually. We went through a dip, and now there's more parking, but, yes, that was a huge concern for a while. Since we're looking outwards, and that was always the intent of the architects that we face the water not the land, we look directly across the water to East Boston, which is a very different kind of neighborhood than we're situated in. The Watershed is in a working shipyard in East Boston. It's not a residential area. It's an industrial, working area. It's a port. 75% percent of the businesses in the shipyard have to be for maritime use, and we're obviously in the 25% that is non-maritime. We rehabilitated a building that had been condemned for 20 years, and rehabbed it in a very light way. The architects call it "design with a small d" so that the patina of the industrial past of the building is part of its architecture. There are train tracks on the floors. There are old cinder block walls. It's a little bit like Mass MoCA in that sense.

You get the sense that this is a building from a certain era; it was a former copper pipe factory. But the idea is also that not only would we get more space—we have 15,000 square feet more exhibition space—but we would also provide a different kind of experience for our visitor in that it's a

raw space that's given over once a year to a single artist. It's a seasonal space with a boat operating only during the warmer months. An artist is invited to commit to a new work, do something of a certain scale, with an immersive quality. Also, the hope is that an artist would respond to the site in some way: this history of the building and its industrial history; the history of immigration, which is very strong in East Boston; and the site being on the water. The next artist we're working with is looking at issues around climate change and rising tides. There's also a desire to locate those projects very specifically in a time and in a place. The desire is certainly expansion, but also to open up to new audiences and new communities.

East Boston is geographically separated from the city of Boston. Historically, it has been an immigrant community, and continues to be so. It used to be Irish and Italian immigrants in the 20th century and more recently there are communities of Central Americans, mostly Salvadorans. Over fifty percent of East Boston households are Spanish speaking. The desire also was to grow our audiences by being in a neighborhood and welcoming the neighborhood that we're in. We did that by being free. The Watershed is free all the time. We wrote all of our didactics in English and Spanish in the Watershed and were really thinking about the space in a very different way. It's not a white cube. We're not going to do drawing shows there. It's going to be a very different kind of experience. So, that desire for expansion also came out of a desire to try and grow our audiences and to diversify our audiences as well.

AK

That preemptively answers some of the questions I was going to ask about how you made that connection with the local community near the Watershed. My understanding is that you take a boat across the river between the two venues. Is that correct?

ER

That is correct.

AK

It could be a situation where you just have people shuttling between the two venues and not actually ever entering into a neighborhood or vice versa. I'm

really curious about that dynamic. There's been so many questions about cultural architecture landing in neighborhoods. We can see what happened at 356 Mission in Los Angeles, which was not a residential neighborhood per se, but raised a lot of the same thorny questions about gentrification and community. What are some of the conversations about this on your end, and what have the successes or failures been so far?

ER

These are ongoing conversations. We've been open just a couple of months, so I'd say we're still learning. I would say the primary way that we wanted to land in the community was through building relationships through organizations that already exist in that community and have the trust of the community. We had some relationships already, mostly through our education department, with East Boston High School and another elementary schools in East Boston. We developed those relationships deeper and then developed new relationships with the East Boston Health Center, which is a community health center that's very much at the center of that community. Their director is this wonderful guy who believes amazingly that art has a place in health, and art has a place in bringing joy to people's lives, and that has value with what we're doing. We also deepened a relationship we already had with an organization called Zumix, which runs music programs for youth and the community.

We spent probably a year in the lead up to the opening of the Watershed just being out in the community, deepening those relationships, learning from the people who live there what their concerns were, what we could provide for them. For example, one of the things we heard from the health center is that there's an obesity problem specifically in East Boston. They have a movement program for their residents, but they were running out of space for their movement program. One of the conversations we had was, in the off-season, could the Watershed be the place for the movement program? We're hoping that those conversations will be two-sided and continue to develop, and I would say relationship building will take some time. We've started to get some of the numbers back in terms of who has been coming to the Watershed, and we had a large number of people from the neighborhood attending.

One thing that we saw is we had Spanish tours on the weekend, storytelling tours for kids, but we saw that those weren't well attended. Maybe five people came one time, and so we were wondering, well, why is that the case? Are we not advertising? Are we not reaching out to the community? Those are things that we're going to look at more carefully for next year. The gentrification aspect is something that we've been thinking a lot about. We're in a working shipyard that's owned by Massport. They own the airport and other kinds of ports. The location where we are, the shipyard, is not a residential area and will never be because it is owned by Massport. Nevertheless, right next door to us is a community that has been gentrifying for some time, and especially at the waterfront property, there's a bunch of new condos that have been developed over the last five years or so. It's definitely a conversation that is happening in that neighborhood as families who've been there for several generations are getting pushed out. We haven't seen too much animosity toward the ICA because a lot of that gentrification had happened before we moved in, but I think we're all cognizant that our move there might symbolize further gentrification. The night of our opening there were some protests, pretty low-key protests, from members of the community about our presence. It's been commented on in several articles, but wasn't a huge conversation, or it hasn't been yet.

Perhaps as we gain more trust with members of the community through our relationships with these organizations that we've started, the key is that we're not seen as an interloper, but really as part of the fabric of the community. That all falls on what we can provide them.

AK

How much of that work has fallen on curatorial, to circle back to Ruth's comment about how we all get stretched thin in our institutional contexts? All of our institutions seem to take on more than what our capacity actually allows, partially because we're all passionate about what we do, but also because of the state of funding in the arts. As far as adding 15,000 square feet to your program, while exciting, that's also a lot of extra work, and I'm

wondering how that's been for your team.

ER

Good question, because we did not add more permanent staff, as is pretty typical of expansion programs. It's definitely stretching the team, and I've thought a lot about what that does to our program on the other side of the harbor. Does that mean we take another traveling show, one more every 18 months or something? It's hard to say, because the first year was also when we were building the building or renovating the building, which was not insignificant. It was hard the first year, which we're still in, with the Watershed. It's hard to say what its long-term impact is. I definitely worry about it. I worry about burnout with the team in curatorial and in registration. We rely a lot on outside contractors to fill in and help, but that's a very different kind of labor force. There's maybe not that same sort of sense of "This is my place, this is my investment" that a full-time staff member might have. I worry about it long term. I think it's something that we'll just have to see over time if there are other levers that I can pull, because it adds so much to the program that maybe then the program on the other side of the harbor doesn't have to be full steam all the time. We produce a lot. We do about 10 shows a year, and that's a lot of shows. The question for me is, maybe we don't have to produce so much. Maybe there's another way to look at it.

AK

That's actually a great segue into my next question, which is just taking a step back and talking a little bit more about how you program the year and what are your cycles, and is it regular?

ER

We have started looking at the ICA in three distinct seasons: the fall-winter, winter-spring, and then summer. The reason that we've done that is two-fold. One is that we are, as you know, a university town. We see a real difference in our viewership and visitors in the fall and in the spring. We see real opportunities to link with area universities, professors, and programs. Then, in the summer, we have a real spike in tourists who come to the institution. We also have great performing arts programming that only happens in the summer, which is outdoor music and outdoor events that attract a whole different kind of audience than normally comes during the fall, winter, and spring when we can't do those outdoor events. So, we started programming really looking at shows that we think make sense for the summer, which tend

to be exhibitions that I would say have a lower barrier of entry, knowing that our audiences that come in the summertime are largely not as familiar with contemporary art. So, what can we do to engage them and bring them in? The fall and the spring is when we schedule the shows that are a little bit more academic or scholarly, the larger group shows, the ones that kind of have a heft to them that maybe could make real connections with the programs here in the universities.

But it doesn't always fall so neatly. For example, this summer we hosted *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85*, which is a Brooklyn Museum show. In an ideal scenario we would have had that in the fall or in the spring because of all of the tie-ins with gender studies programs, African-American studies programs, art history, etcetera. But because it's a touring show, we just didn't have that flexibility, so we put it in the summer not really knowing what would happen, and thinking perhaps it was maybe better suited to our when-school-is-in-session audiences. But, actually, it's turned out to have done extremely well. We've gotten great visitor numbers, so that's been an interesting learning experience for me. Not as many people know who these artists are, but it's done really well in the season when there are people visiting who aren't familiar with contemporary art as a whole. Maybe it has something to do with the narrative that feels so resonant today. That is my takeaway too — that it's something people respond to, even if they don't know the artist, that they can think about that narrative of activism through art. There's also the fact that there's so much diversity of art on view, like clothing and posters and paintings and sculptures and videos and the rest. So, loosely, that's kind of how I think about our programming in terms of each season.

AK

That's really interesting.

RE

When you, Alex, were talking about audience versus community and as Eva was talking about East Boston, it made me think about the bracing level of development around the Seaport. When I started working here, I walked across parking lots. Now I weave amongst 15-story buildings. The majority of those buildings are corporations or luxury condominiums, and it's very easy to hate the development and the architecture and the wealth that it is part of, which is a larger kind of narrative of inequality and a housing crisis that's going on in Boston at large. The culture of this neighborhood and what the ICA represents within it. It's a bit of an outlier at this point compared to our neighbors. That's something I think about a lot in my morning commute; that I think about a lot when I meet friends down here.

At the same time, it's now inhabited down here. There are lots of restaurants; there are people I know that live in the neighborhood. Now,

there's a lot more to do in this neighborhood, which changes the experience of the ICA. Our current location — especially when compared to our former spot in Boylston, which was very much embedded in the heart of the city and along Newbury Street, which is a shopping district — used to be the industrial outskirts. Now it's the new development neighborhood. It is still a bit on the outskirts, so I think there is a sense of a voyage to the ICA. Therefore, I think there's even more onus on us to inspire people to come, no matter what the parking situation is. I think our program really has to drive and attract people here because you're not going to just happen upon the ICA.

ER

The other thing that I would build on there, which Ruth has heard me say a million times, is our shows have to perform many things — and this was for me a real learning curve from my previous institution where you always just had Matisse and Picasso on view. If somebody didn't like X show that you were organizing, there was always that option. At the ICA, because the square footage is pretty intimate or pretty small, every show has to perform something. It's a lot to ask for a 1,000 square foot show of a young artist who's never shown in an institution. I would say curatorially that's the biggest challenge that we have. I think a lot about the fact that the bigger shows really have to attract a wide audience to help the smaller shows so that they don't have to perform as much. And I don't mean just performing in terms of numbers, but performing in terms of visitor satisfaction and experience and press. They have to do a lot, and sometimes I think it's really hard to expect shows to do that, and it's unfair maybe sometimes to expect all shows to do that. It makes it harder to take risks.

AK

Is there a lot of pressure in your institution for attendance figures? How do you quantify success within the institution?

ER

We talk a lot about that. I think a lot about it. There is pressure. There is gate pressure for sure. I feel like it's increased, actually, even since I've been here. I think the Watershed will relieve that. It's designed to relieve that. We have a whole new space, so hopefully, that will increase visitor numbers. But for me, I try and think about a different metric of success that's not just attendance. Of course, I want people to see what we do. I don't want to do something in a vacuum. I do shows so that they can be seen by audiences, but for me there's other metrics of success as well that include what our peers think in terms of press, our national reputation, striving for artistic excellence, scholarship and

publication and what we're contributing to the field, the diversity of offerings in terms of artistic viewpoints and methods of working.

One of the things that we do when we're proposing exhibitions is we think about what that exhibition will do for the program. For example, a solo show that gives an artist a platform or a first book that contributes to the scholarship on that artist in the field. When I look at those exhibition proposals, I try and place them on the program as best as I can so that there's a little bit being done in each season. There's one show that might be the scholarship kind of piece of it, and then there's another show that might be responding to a relevant issue of our time. And that's one piece, and then there's another show that is given platform to a new artist that's never been shown. So, for me, a measure of success is making sure I've sort of hit on all of those things and hopefully hit on them well, but it's murky. It's murky because, clearly, my measures of success are not going to always necessarily align with the director or the pressures that you might have from the board.

AK

How exactly does funding work in your institution? Is there a lot of pressure put on the curators to have the exhibition program help with fundraising? What is the breakdown?

ER

We have an endowment, and it's small, but it's growing. The most recent capital campaign, which we're still in the midst of, is not a capital campaign exactly because it was to support the Watershed and other expansive initiatives. But one of those initiatives under that umbrella is to build the endowment to really look forward so that we're not relying so heavily on individual giving, which like most museums, is a large part of our annual operating budget. Grants are, of course, a big part as well, but the hope is that growing the endowment in some significant way will also help. I would say in terms of fundraising, curatorial is pretty involved, especially on grants and things like that. We're very involved in fundraising there. I would say probably more than the other curators, as a chief curator, I'm involved in fundraising with donors and trustees. But I haven't felt it's very different than our peers. That's not my impression. It sort of feels more or less in line. I don't know if you agree, Ruth, on that.

RE

The great thing here, in comparison to some of the conversations I've had with peers, is that there isn't this expectation that you need to fundraise to do

your show. In curatorial, we have a budget, and that budget is managed and allocated, but there isn't this sense of, "If I don't get this donor to give this amount of money, I won't get to do this show or this artist or this book that I really want to do and that Eva and Jill have already approved." That's a huge relief because I know colleagues for whom that is not the case. I don't know how unique it is, but I certainly am glad that there's a confirmation of the show, and then we figure out how we can fundraise for the operating budget and the curatorial budget. The other thing that I was thinking about the measures of success, is that I feel like so often when you talk about a measure of success you think of an externalized measure of success. I've been really interested in thinking about internal measures of success for institutions and the satisfaction of coming to work and doing one's job and the collegiality and the social relationships that form in an institution. What defines an institution is the 65 people who put in the effort to come every day and walk through the same door and see each other in the hallway. That's something that I've been thinking about too in how much can an institution provide for and make a good life for its employees, and allowing that to be a measure of an institution's success as much as how it's speaking to external audiences.

AK

That's a great answer: thinking about the internal well-being as much as the external projections. I'm curious how that also extends to the way that you work with artists. You pay artists for exhibitions, correct?

ER

We do. We've been endeavoring to remunerate an artist's labor that they perform for us in exhibitions. We did work researching W.A.G.E. We are not able to meet the W.A.G.E. calculation yet. It's not something that's currently possible for us in our budget, but we have been in the last couple of years really looking carefully, especially for solo presentations, to remunerate artists for their time and their labor and not just if they're making a new work. But, in addition to that, when they do make new work, we support the production of it. And that varies. Sometimes it's a bigger commission. Other times it's helping with framing or something like that.

AK

I think it's interesting to see how different institutions are at least bringing up that conversation

internally with regard to their budgets.

This is kind of a boring question, but you charge admission in the main building. Is that correct?

ER

Yes.

AK

Is that a revenue builder?

ER

It is. And when we do our yearly projections for attendance, they're tied to revenue, and both attendance and revenue from admissions gets reported to the board. Oftentimes, it's the case where the number of people is up, but revenue is down because many students get in free, or with partnerships and things like that. But both of those are tracked by the board.

AK

That actually leads me to a question about how you all think about accessibility within your institution. That is a pretty broad term, in the same way that audience or community is. But there's many different ways to think about access, whether that's with regard to race, class, gender, or questions of mobility, etcetera. I'm interested in how that is approached in your institution.

ER

You're asking at a good time because it's a conversation that's increasingly become important—a conversation around access and inclusion. This started a little bit with our strategic plan, which is called a "Radical Welcome" and which we're now starting year three of. It's on our website, but it is Anna Deavere Smith's term that we're using, with her blessing, to be radically welcome to all of those who enter our doors. And that can be expressed in a variety of different ways, from signage at the visitor welcome desk to exhibition design and even to the very kinds of exhibitions that we do

or educational programs that we do. That's the larger umbrella under which more specific conversations around access and inclusion have been happening with regards to differently-abled individuals.

This has come up most recently because I'm doing a William Forsythe exhibition, which is an exhibition of interactive artworks that invite the viewer to move in one way or another. It's raised a lot of questions about who can participate. How can they participate? How do we make this as welcoming and interactive as possible, which is the artist's wish, for his artworks to be interacted with by as many people as possible from kids to the elderly to the blind or the deaf. We have a committee that is dedicated to access and inclusion questions that is institutional. It's a fairly new committee, and we recently went through a brand redesign that now includes more icons and things like that that are around accessibility.

For the first show, we have a few new initiatives that are aimed at increasing the accessibility of some of these interactive works for a variety of different visitors. I would say this is in many ways the beginning of that conversation. We can't do everything. We don't have a full-time staff member that's dedicated to access and inclusion. We have this committee that is made up of people from different departments, and I think we're going to see how those conversations go, see how Forsythe goes. But there is a desire to adapt and embody that radical welcome as much as possible. And I will say, hopefully not too cynically, it's a little bit like what we were talking about with the accordion. I like that analogy in that there's desire. The radical welcome is this desire to be as open and accessible to all.

That also includes welcoming to different genders, races, and classes. But then, as it always does, it comes down to bandwidth. How much can we do with the existing staff in the limited bandwidth that we have? And quite honestly, that's something that I see us coming up against all the time. With Forsythe, we're doing something really interesting, developing interesting tools for our visitors that we've never done before, but I wonder, is this something then we can continue to do with every show? I don't know if we can.

AK

Totally. You need to prevent staff exhaustion, and it seems like having the permanent collection is maybe also one way to help balance it out. Is that something you try to incorporate in the program as a way to try to curb fatigue a bit?

ER

A little bit, yes. We only have 300 objects in the collection, so if we buy something, we want it to make a big impact. We've been acquiring some room-filling things like big installations, video installation that could be an

exhibition, if need be. We've recently presented Steve McQueen's *Ashes and Hito Steyerl's Liquidity Inc.* — two collection works — as exhibitions. That approach could be another lever in the bandwidth equation.

AK

That's exciting, because it seems like you're both in the institution at a particular juncture where there's an ability to create a new history with that collection. But it's 2018. All institutions are precarious to a certain extent in our current climate, but I think a positive thing about what institutions can do is institutionalize and protect the things that we all care about that are perhaps under threat. I'd love to hear a little bit more about what lights you on fire about what you have coming up ahead, and how you think about the stakes of those projects.

ER

There are three things that are coming up immediately that I'm working on that for me are really exciting, and express my vision or my interest in what our institution can do. One is the William Forsythe exhibition, which is a real stretch for me personally and for the institution working with a choreographer. It's a stretch for him as well, because he hasn't done very many institutional shows, but it really is all about trying to bring more interdisciplinarity into our program. We are seeing this, of course, all over in many museums, but because we have a performing arts program, I feel like having that interdisciplinarity visible in our gallery is really important. We've done it in many different ways, and so this is a continuation of that. But it's also a collaboration with the Boston Ballet because the choreographer is in residence there, so I'm super excited about that. I think it will be really a new and different kind of exhibition for us and for the city of Boston for sure.

Then, we're working with John Akomfrah this summer, and I'm really excited. We co-commissioned a piece with the Barbican and a few other European institutions that is about climate change. It's a six-channel piece that really is amazing and beautiful and symphonic, but informs us about the world we are in, right at this moment, that speaks to some of my deepest fears. Not everyone, clearly, is thinking this way. But that to me is exciting because not only is he such an incredible voice in the world of film, but it speaks to our location on the water. And that's exciting in terms of activating our site on the harbor.

And then the third thing that I'm most excited about that is coming up very soon is a show that Ruth and I are co-organizing around the topic of art and migration. I feel like this is a moment to respond to our time to talk about and engage deeply in some of the most divisive issues and rhetoric that are happening, not just in our own country but across the world. And that's what we do best, I would say, in many ways, so I'm excited about being able

to have that show and having that opportunity to engage audiences deeply on the topic.

RE

For me as well, it's really seeing how we can use the platform of the museum to address this topic in an ever-changing landscape.

Thinking about connections between the topical with something that's historical is manifest in the childhood show. I'm thinking about it in personal ways, and ways in which being a curator and a mother intersects in thinking through questions of power and labor through that exhibition. Then lastly for me, I've been thinking a lot about the duration of relationships that I have. I've been in Boston for seven years. I've been at the ICA for four this November, and it's interesting to be in this time period as a curator here and to really think about the duration of some of those relationships. I'm building on the next level and going deeper with some of the artists, the donors, and the area professors. I'm maybe working on our second program together or it's the second time I've been in conversation with somebody. Feeling that maturity and that seasoned quality for me personally is something that I'm really looking forward to and building on the depth that I now feel within this city.

But I wonder what institution other than an art school like Tyler would give me this much leeway. Like, "You want to have a funeral for a home in a neighborhood nowhere even close to us, and our logo isn't on it? What?" or, "You want us to fix every broken instrument in the school district?" But through all of this, thankfully, they are able to see the long term social and educational benefits of this approach and are just as excited as I am. It's a pretty unique situation.
