

Conversation with
JAMILLAH JAMES,
ICA LA

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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JAMILLAH JAMES, ICA LA

Jamillah James is the Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. In 2018, Elsa Longhauser announced she was stepping down as Executive Director at the ICA LA, and in July 2019, it was announced that Anne Ellegood will be the next Director of the ICA LA.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

What is your position at the ICA LA and how long have you been there?

JAMILLAH JAMES

I'm Curator at the ICA LA and I've been here since late June 2016.

AK

When did the ICA LA open its doors?

JJ

We opened in September of 2017, so we've been open nearly two years now.

AK

So, you were around for the planning stages before it actually opened to the public?

JJ

Yes, I joined as one of the first full-staff hires after the decision had been made to move from Santa Monica to Downtown L.A. and do a rebranding and renaming of the museum.

AK

ICA LA is a new institution, but technically it has an older lineage. Can you give us a little bit of background and how it grew out of the Santa Monica Museum?

JJ

The ICA LA opened as the Santa Monica Museum in 1984. The founding Director was Abby Sher, who oversaw the first several years of the museum. Our current Executive Director Elsa Longhauser was hired about 17 years ago and she was really the one who spearheaded the move from Bergamot Station in Santa Monica to downtown Los Angeles. The museum has quite a rich institutional history in terms of programming and community-based initiatives. But with the changes that were happening in Santa Monica—by way of development and the reticence to embrace certain changes in Santa Monica, like the addition of the light rail and the changes that were happening in Bergamot Station—the museum thought it best to establish itself in a more centralized location in Los Angeles where people were living and working.

AK

Do you consider there to be a throughline between the Santa Monica Museum and the ICA LA or do they feel like separate institutions?

JJ

I feel like the Santa Monica Museum is embedded in the programmatic priorities of this institution, which is still a non-collecting institution and very much dedicated to artistic experimentation and to supporting living artists at different points in their careers—be it the emerging artist or the very established artist who's trying to test out new ideas or do something different. I think there's definitely a consistency with what we're trying to do now. But given our new context, there's also an opportunity to expand on the vision of the Santa Monica Museum and contemporize it and bring new players into the mix.

AK

What do you think are some of the biggest changes between these two institutions? You were in L.A. before you joined the institution, correct?

JJ

I was the Assistant Curator at the Hammer Museum, which is what originally moved me to Los Angeles from New York. I'm not entirely convinced that we're that different of an institution, but the context has definitely changed. Santa Monica is a more affluent part of Los Angeles. Now we're downtown where, granted, there's a lot of development and gentrification, but we're also aware of different challenges that being in downtown Los Angeles brings to the surface. There are a lot of changes happening, but there are also serious social issues and crises that need addressing that are right on our doorstep.

AK

The context of Bergamot Station is really different. In some ways, even though there are other galleries there, it is kind of isolated. And now you're in a district where there's a lot going on—there are restaurants, galleries, and other museums.

JJ

And things are constantly changing for good, or for not.

AK

Right, and I also imagine that there is a new audience. Because we're talking about names and public perceptions of institutions, I'm curious if you have any insight into the renaming. Obviously, it couldn't have been the Santa Monica Museum if it were downtown, but why the name ICA LA? A coda to that is that there was another ICA in Los Angeles' history. Do you know if

there was any thought given to that historical touchstone?

JJ

As an organization that is non-collecting, actively commissioning artists to make new work, and supporting new work and new ideas, I think the name change was a matter of aligning ourselves with institutions globally that are of the same ethos. It made sense for us to rename ourselves an "Institute of Contemporary Art" as opposed to a "Contemporary Art Center," or any of the other ways of thinking about institutions of our size. That said, there was definitely a cognizance of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), which was an artist-run space in Los Angeles from 1974 to 1987. We are not artist-run, and that is a point of distinction, but we are artist-centered, which is also a very important distinction to make. We're willing to have dialogues with artists in our communities and really support artists at various points in their careers. We have an Artist's Council, which is something that's built into the governance of the institution. We meet with them three to four times a year. They really let us know what they think would be most effective in terms of the programming, or how to continue this museum and keep it a sustainable voice within the city.

TAUSIF NOOR

There are so many institutions and smaller organizations focused on contemporary art in Los Angeles. How do you see yourselves within this network, and what are some of the qualities that make ICA LA unique?

JJ

There are a number of large institutions here that are also interested in contemporary art, MOCA and the Hammer being chief among them. But there are many smaller organizations, so we kind of fit neatly in between say, LAXART, LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions], or 18th Street Arts Center, and that's not to even mention the museums that have also moved here over the last several years. I think it's a work in progress in terms of how we distinguish ourselves from our larger neighboring institutions. I think because we are smaller, we have the ability to be more responsive, when possible, to things that might be answered or at least addressed in some way through contemporary artistic practices. We have a smaller overhead. L.A. is a city that doesn't necessarily have the history of the alternative or artist-

run spaces that New York is well known for, but that isn't to say that that's not changing. I think an institution like the ICA can fit into that conversation because we operate as a museum but we also have the spirit of a DIY, or artist-run, or alternative space.

TN

That's wonderful. You talked about size—what is the staff size of the museum, and how many curators are there?

JJ

I'm the only curator. Our director will periodically organize things, but I tend to manage the curatorial program, which is a mix of ICA-originated exhibitions, guest exhibitions, and touring shows. Chances are, I am organizing something every season. Right now, our staff overall is 12. There's a mix of part-time and full-time people. Senior officers are myself, the Deputy Director, the Director of Learning and Engagement in addition to our Executive Director. Expanding our capacity as an institution is something that we're definitely trying to prioritize because we do a lot, and there isn't enough of us to do nearly everything that we would like to do.

Our capacity should meet our ambitions at some point. Since we've been open for two years, maybe now would be that pivotal moment to explore how we do that, whether it is bringing in a more junior curator or in other ways.

TN

In the two years since the ICA LA has been open, have you figured out a regular rhythm of shows? Do you do a fixed number per season, or calendar year?

JJ

It's changed even in this last year because the fall season was only the first time that we separated the galleries. Our primary gallery is 5,500 sq. ft., but the fall season was the first time that we divided that space to accommodate two separate exhibitions. There's a little bit of flexibility there in terms of whether or not we have one or two shows during a season. We also have a project room that's about 700 sq. ft., where we host emerging artists' projects or projects by artists that may have not had as much exposure in Los Angeles or the U.S. And then we have this smaller ancillary space called the Annex that my colleague, Asuka Hisa, who's the Director of Learning and Engagement,

programs with smaller presentations by artists and community members. There's also an outside project wall that is 20 x 40 feet that we program every so often. It really changes. We're experimenting right now with elongating our seasons a little bit; it's not possible for us to do four exhibition cycles a year.

AK

Certainly not with one curator.

JJ

I think three is reasonable. Two would be sane, honestly. Because museums and institutions here tend to keep their shows up a little bit longer—even commercial galleries keep their shows up longer—I think that we can afford to stretch things out a little bit just so that we're not burning ourselves out.

AK

What is your total operating budget for the year?

JJ

Our operating budget is currently 2.5 million dollars. I think it's definitely a major increase from that of the Santa Monica Museum. Our funding is really a constellation of private funding and foundational support and individual giving grants. It's really a mixed bag. We also have a couple of councils. There is the Curator's Council, which I lead, where every couple of weeks or months we take a group out to galleries, artist studios, etc. They pay a fixed rate per year which supports the emerging artists program here—the project space and the outside. There's also a Learning and Engagement Council, in addition to some membership programs, such as the newly-launched 1717. It's a \$40 per year membership program that supports the hope, a lofty hope, of being a totally public-funded institution.

AK

Do you charge admission?

JJ

No, we're free.

AK

That's great. In some institutions, admission is seen as a revenue generator, so new content cycling through will also bring in new audiences.

TN

Is there a formula with your program with regard to group exhibitions and solo exhibitions, or is it a mix?

JJ

We tend to do group exhibitions around the summer, which is fairly consistent with what a lot of commercial galleries do. This coming summer, all of our shows will be up through August. We mix it up as much as possible, but it's been the case that we've had single-artist presentations since we opened, with the exception of our summer show last year, which was the presentation of Norm Laich, the local sign painter and fabricator.

AK

Do you have autonomy with regard to your programming? What is the process of getting exhibitions on your calendar?

JJ

It's a pretty short process in that there's really only me and our director. The board isn't really a part of that conversation in terms of what goes on the schedule. Right now, we're programmed for at least the next year-and-a-half. Some major shows have been scheduled, but there are some spaces in the calendar that might accommodate shorter-range projects that might come up. We have a couple of touring shows coming in next year, and a guest-curated show next summer. I like to have the rhythm of there being at least one guest-curated show and one touring show to mix things up.

AK

Right, and I guess that also creates a little more variety in the voice of the institution?

JJ

Totally.

AK

It sounds really exciting to be in a place where there aren't multiple layers of bureaucracy to get a show on the schedule,

or where you can literally walk over to your director and have a conversation and lay out a season. From the outside that sounds great.

JJ

I do sometimes miss the process of being in conversation with several other colleagues within an institution to discuss the ways in which a season will be shaped. I miss a tiny bit of bureaucracy every now and then and having different people to go to about what the season is here.

AK

Maybe that taps into questions of growth, which is something that we're interested in too—how institutions think about scale. Now that you've relocated to a new building and there's been changes in that respect, what are the upcoming plans or aspirations with regard to how you see the institution growing? I also know that Elsa is getting ready to retire—is that correct?

JJ

Yes, and with the change of leadership here, it's hard to know what the priorities will be, in terms of staffing and direction. I think there will be some thinking for sure about capacity-building so that we can maintain the level of performance we've had over the last few years and so that we can extend our reach into different parts of the city and extend our national and international reach as well. Whoever is coming in will definitely be essential to that. I don't often think of myself as a chief curator here—I'm the chief curator by default because I'm the only one!

AK

Oh, you're too modest.

JJ

It would be great to see what the new director would like to see accomplished in terms of the programmatic aims of the institution, which of course won't be too divergent from what our mission is and the way that we've been operating, but new ideas are always welcome and needed.

TN

With that in mind, one of the things that I noticed on the website is that you have a lot of partnerships with artists and also community partnerships. Can you tell us a little bit about how you go about deciding who to partner with and how that works?

JJ

That is really more so the purview of Asuka Hisa, our Director of Learning and Engagement—she's really the engine behind seeking out those partnerships that are external to the institution. We work together occasionally in that regard to identify people or organizations that might support the exhibitions in a programmatic way. If an artist has some kind of proposition within their show about food scarcity or food access, we would get together and talk about navigating those questions or come up with a program to tie the exhibitions to something that's real and happening in Los Angeles. But I must give full credit to Asuka because she's really the one that's actively on the ground and thinking about the ways of extending the reach of the institution into the community and thinking about partnerships with people that are external to the institution.

AK

Something that we've been thinking about is who you might think of as your institutional peers. This might be with regard to scale, or it could be a historical link, or a conceptual peer. Who does ICA LA feel aligned with?

JJ

I feel like there's definitely some synergy between us and LAXART—they're an alternative space that's now directed by Hamza Walker, who's a curator that I've always had respect for and Catherine Taft, who is Deputy Director. I would also say LACE, of course. We're bigger, scale-wise, but LACE, historically, has had some of the most important exhibitions in the city of Los Angeles and they have really been champions of artists that have been overlooked or marginalized in some way or another. That is something that I'm very invested in as a curator: to give platforms and space to artists that may not have had an opportunity to show in Los Angeles historically for one reason or another. Human Resources is a space that is definitely more active, and unfortunately things are changing for them, but their model has been designed to support performance in the city. I would love to see us move in that direction and really be a hub for various communities to converge. But I think nationally, I think there's kinship with other ICAs. I have colleagues in each ICA and we keep in touch about the kinds of programming that's happening. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the New Museum, which is an institution that I definitely respect. It's definitely where I'd like to see us be positioned in terms of the dynamism of the program, the expansiveness, the international reach. But we're very small.

AK

Right.

JJ

I think there's a lot of different ways to envision this institution and what it can be. I definitely want us to keep giving space to artists that are making some of the more challenging and engaging work of our time and also continue to work on dissolving the divide between publics and institutions.

TN

I really like that phrasing because I think it leads into another question that we've been asking people: Who do you consider to be your audience and is that the same thing as your community? I wonder now, with the shift to Downtown Los Angeles, if your audience has also shifted with the move, or whether you see new audiences?

JJ

I think we're still getting our old audience—people that knew the old Santa Monica Museum and people that have been supportive of the transition, but we're also attracting different audiences now given our location and proximity to other museums and galleries that are cropping up downtown in the so-called "Arts District." We are capturing people that are curious as to what we are and what we're doing. We're also getting, through various partnerships and initiatives, different people who have not ordinarily had cause to come to a museum. There's some occasional programming for children and parents at nighttime that's bilingual, and we're getting different types of audiences that way. We also have the Monday for School program with the elementary school that's down the street from us.

The demographics that we're attracting are definitely changing and expanding and diversifying, especially now that more and more attention is being paid to Los Angeles as a first-rate art city, which it's always been, regardless of the new attention and art fairs and whatnot. It's always been a very important city and it's changing. There are people that have been in the city for years. Students are coming here to take advantage of all of the fantastic art schools and there are people who are also just interested for fun. We're firing on all cylinders, but we're always looking to expand our reach.

AK

You mentioned that some of your programs are bilingual. Are your labels bilingual?

JJ

Yes. Our wall didactics are bilingual and we also produce supplemental packets that translate all of our extended label material into Spanish.

AK

Was that a change from the Santa Monica Museum?

JJ

Yes, as far as I know, there was not a use of bilingual didactic materials. It was a decision that was made after the galleries and museums here participated in *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, which focused on Latin America and its relationship to Los Angeles. People translated things for that, and I really wanted to see us continue with that and not have it be a one-time basis, but really have it be embedded in what we're doing, to signal that we want to talk to as many different audiences as possible.

AK

That also brings up questions of accessibility, in its widest inflection, and I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about how that's thought through in the experience of coming to ICA LA.

JJ

The bilingual labels are something that we sought to do internally. Of course, there are many different languages that are used within Los Angeles, and we'd like to feature them all, but translation's not inexpensive, so that's something that we're sensitive to. There's been interest in the education program with translation and there's been a couple of programs where we've had American Sign Language translation. It's all a work in progress at this point—we're trying to be as accessible as possible, both in person and as much as we can online.

AK

Can you locate us a little bit in terms of where the ICA LA physically is? What neighborhood is it in and what building do you occupy. What was the ICA building before?

JJ

The ICA building, prior to us moving in, was a clothing warehouse. The company manufactured clothing for pre-teens, and they actually moved to a larger facility in Vernon that better met their needs. We're on 7th Street in Downtown Los Angeles—we're not in the Arts District or Boyle Heights, but in an industrial area with a lot of warehouses and manufacturing and cold storage. We're directly across from the Greyhound Station, which is an interesting landmark to be near because it's a place where people travel in and out of Los Angeles. There are a number of businesses that are moving to this area and luxury housing—we're in the midst of a rapidly changing landscape.

AK

Does ICA own the building or do you rent?

JJ

It's something that we're working on. Currently we rent.

AK

I can imagine that becoming an issue down the line as the neighborhood changes around you.

JJ

Yes.

AK

In the ICA's new incarnation, and with the search for a new director, you're in a moment of possibility. I'm wondering what some of your frustrations might be and also about what you're looking forward to within the institution.

JJ

I think the primary thing—and I think it's something that organizations of our size are always grappling with—is the access to resources in order to support the ambitious work that we're doing and getting the public and supporters to understand the necessity of different ways of operating the institution and different ways of supporting artists.

AK

Right.

JJ

Not just purchasing artists' work, but supporting exhibitions and scholarship. It shouldn't just always be about the object and ownership and that kind of thing, but about having a more holistic approach to being a fan and supporter of the artists. I think that's maybe one way that I would like to see us help educate our public to move towards a more sustained arts philanthropy. I think that's kind of an Achilles heel for small arts institutions and maybe to Los Angeles, because things have been done very differently here for a number of years. Now, there are more museums and more spaces and more artists and there's definitely more need for support at varying levels.

AK

I think that's a really lovely answer. As you know, the U.S. is not a particularly supportive place for the arts, and I think that's why so many institutions have resorted to private collections or corporate funders and the various things to keep things afloat. It's interesting to hear you talk about how the ICA tries to cultivate its audience and shape a new generation of people who are invested in artists and art practice.

TN

I think that really speaks to what you mentioned earlier about being an artist-centric institution and what that means and how to get that across to your audience. I'm wondering how you think about artistic labor and remuneration for artists. Do you commission a lot of new work?

JJ

We've commissioned some, not a lot, or at least supported the production of things. I think it's critically important that museums move towards honoraria and support for artists. This labor, intellectual and otherwise, is not free. And we shouldn't still be in a place where we're thinking that because an artist has an exhibition that it's enough capital. I don't think that's something that can fly anymore, given how hard it is to make a way to do this work. It's not just artists who are having challenges; it's curators and writers, and we're all in this together in terms of this arts economy and how unbalanced it is, and who really gets to benefit from that.

And so, to me, it's really important that we pay honoraria and offer support as much as we can. I would love to see us move towards W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for the Greater Economy) certification. It will take some time, once we get our footing and get stable where we can actually really officially do it. There's a lot of conversation right now about fairness and doing the best by artists in spite of the lack of support from our government and the lack

of support just on an individual level—the imbalance between the non-profit and the commercial side of things. I think one thing that museums can do, at the very least, is to try to help artists as much as they can—not just extending opportunities, but monetizing those opportunities. You can't feed your family just because you're in an exhibition.

AK

I want to talk more about how you view the stakes of your own work. You started to touch on that with regard to your vision for the economy for artists and bringing artists into visibility who might not otherwise have a platform. I'd love to hear a little bit more about your curatorial work within the context that you're in now. How do you see that evolving over time, and would that be different in another context?

JJ

I think maybe because this is a unique opportunity to be a central voice within the program of the institution, I'm really just trying to accomplish the things that have been missing from what I've seen on an institutional level—artists that have been absent in one way or another. My priority, in this moment, is working with artists that have not been shown in Los Angeles or have not had the major solo presentations that they're due. I think it would definitely be very much a part of my work generally, in whatever context. I've focused on showing artists who haven't shown much in Los Angeles. Maybe they've exhibited nationally and internationally, but not here—and that's a way for me to learn more about the history of this city and artists who have passed through this city in one way or another. That desire to learn would always be a part of my practice, either here or elsewhere, frankly. It's a different kind of education, trying to connect the dots of what's been the history of art in Los Angeles to art not made in Los Angeles.

AK

Right.

JJ

My commitment to working with women artists, artists of color, and queer-identifying artists is something that would be consistent wherever I am. That commitment is to my peers and colleagues as well as to under-recognized artists within institutions, and not just in a tokenistic way, but something we are actually building into the DNA of the institution.
