I is for Institute, Episode 6:

Conversation with Mari Spirito, Protocinema

With Alex Klein and Pelle Tracey

##Alex Klein
Welcome to the *I is for Institute* podcast. My name is Alex Klein, the Dorothy and Stephen R. Weber (CHE'60) Senior Curator at ICA, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In this series, you will hear from our colleagues working in contemporary arts organizations around the world about their individual perspectives on the work they are doing to shape and imagine different institutional models. At this critical moment when museums and their infrastructures are being reevaluated, these dialogues highlight pressing concerns for artists, art workers, arts institutions, and their publics. We invite you to follow these ongoing conversations and to access the archive at our website www.iisforinstitute.icaphila.org. In this episode, co-hosted with Pelle Tracey, ICA Curatorial Intern and doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, we sat down with Mari Spirito, Executive Director, and Curator of Protocinema, a self-described ambulatory and cross-cultural art organization that commissions and presents site-aware art around the world. We addressed the complexities of working across geographies and the importance of relationship building in the creation of alternative art ecosystems.

##Mari Spirito
My name is Mari Spirito, and I'm the Executive Director of Protocinema, which is a cross-cultural art organization working between Istanbul in New York—we're just over 11 years old now. And before working in the nonprofit field, I was an artist. And then for an even longer time, a gallerist. I found myself going back and forth between Istanbul and New York out of curiosity and fun, and meeting lots of amazing artists and writers. And I also was involved with a organization called Su Platform (Water Platform), which is water activists in Turkey. So, I was really engaged. And at a certain point, I decided to make a business that was fitting into my life instead of my life fitting into my business.

##AK
Thank you so much, Mari. We have so many questions for you today, and I'm really eager to dive into the complexities of place that your organization brings up. But before we go into the present, I'd love if you can take us back and talk about the origin story of Protocinema once you landed in Istanbul, and what was the founding mission?

##MS
The real origin story is that Protocinema, before it became *Protocinema*, was an artist run space. When I was in Boston, and studying at MassArt, I started an underground gallery in my loft with my other artist roommates and we called it M&M gallery. That was when I learned that making exhibitions was even more exciting than making art. And then from there, I went on to support artists by working in galleries. And then slowly over time, when I was in the situation of "what to do?" after working in galleries for 20 years, and having this curiosity about other places, and how I could use my experiences, my resources, my knowledge to bridge the gap between these two places, then I started Protocinema. So, it's really on the model of an artist-run space.

When I was in art school in the late-1980s/early-1990s, there was still the shadow of figures like Virginia Dwan, and Miwon Kwon, and that sort of really radical Earth Art, Land Art… And of course, there was this battle between 1980s painting and Pictures Generation conceptual work, and then in 1992 Rirkrit Tiravanija at 303 Gallery. So, it was like this was all happening while I was coming of age. So that just gives a little bit of context for the earth that I was growing up in. And so, it was really natural that I would just be sort of on the side of the artists, how to support them. And when I asked people what they would want if there was a new art organization in New York and Istanbul, almost across the board, the artists wanted to see artists from other places, exhibitions in their city, and they also wanted support making new work. So that really informed the direction that we went in.

##Pelle Tracey
Alex and I both have a real fascination and interest in names and how they relate to organizations. And so, I was wondering if you could just tell us a little about the history of the name Protocinema and what it means for you?

##MS
That is actually a good story. So, because I knew it was going to be in different places, and moving around and not having a physical space, being free of brick and mortar, always being in motion, but also being obsessed with how perception guides the way our worldview shapes what kind of life we have, I wanted somehow to embody perception and motion in the name. That it wasn't telling you outright, but it was kind of signaling it. In 2011 Protocinema was founded, and the same year Werner Herzog made this film the *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. I don't know if you guys saw that. Werner is in the caves and they're the oldest drawings known to man at that time. They're about 30,000 years old. And he says, "Why do the cave men and women draw the mammals with eight legs instead of four legs?" And then of course, he goes on to answer his own question. And he says, "Maybe this is man's first attempt to represent motion? Maybe this is Protocinema." I was like, "Voila! Ah ha, this is it. This is great!" So, I thought that really embodied all of our main concerns.

But over the years, what's happened is most people I can tell if they haven't been to our website, or social media, or haven't been to an exhibition or event, because they will think that we're a film organization. So, it's almost like a test of if you don't really know who we are, you think we're film organization. But it's also a trick because the name suggests that. It's also about how you don't really know something until you get to know something. It's been kind of interesting to be in a situation where if you're doing cross-cultural work, you're always dealing with misunderstandings. And then at the base of it, I thought I had this name that said it all, but actually, it also creates misunderstanding. So, it's been pretty interesting.

##AK
I'd love to dig a little deeper into the structure of your organization. Could you tell us a little bit more about who's involved in the organization? And then also maybe picking up on this idea of the ambulatory nature of the project, which it always has been. But you've also really explicitly framed it as being grounded in New York and Istanbul. So maybe building on that, can you also speak to the importance of place, and also who you're in dialogue with, and what ecologies you see yourself fitting into?

##MS

I describe Protocinema as a micro organization with a macro reach. It's really small. I'm the only full-time person, Alper Turan is great curator I'm really lucky to work with, who works with me on a daily basis as well, part-time. And we have about five or six other part-time, freelance people. And then we also have a really dedicated, small board of eight members, in addition to an international commissioning committee. The board is really active and involved. We talk through ideas of artists and a structured program. Because it's a pretty radical, freeform thing, it's helpful to have board members who really love art, they love taking risks, they're excited about the radical aspects of it, that another organization might not be so up for. We do it really all together.

And then the issue about place. In the early years of Protocinema, I used to talk more about being site aware and context specific and about place. And I realized that place is a way to talk about responsiveness where the importance of listening to what's going on somewhere. And when you talk about place, you're also talking about time, not durational time, but like what's going on at that moment of time. Listening to those things, making exhibitions and commissioning work that's in concert with what's going on in that place in that time. And so that's why I think that really, you know, using terminology in the early years, like "site aware" and "context specific" was obviously trying to take from the site specificity that came before us. Our version is more fluid, it's got legs, it can walk around, if an artwork changes country it doesn't mean that the art doesn't make sense anymore. It can also have just changed meaning in another place. And then we can prioritize listening to what's happening, and then responding to it in lots of different ways, like which artists we choose, what the artists want, everyone has different needs. And then how do you provide for those different needs? This means I have to be changing all the time and was more of a priority in the early years. And then it's still a priority, I think it's shifting,

##PT
To dig into that a little more, you've lived and worked between Istanbul and New York for a long time. Is your insider or outsider, or kind of expat status, do those impact how you see your work, or how your work is perceived?

##MS
I think ultimately Protocinema is about how we each perceive our world, and then what capacity we have to understand each other, within that. So when we talk about this thing of like being a foreigner being inside and outside, the longer, I work abroad, the more of a foreigner I feel. And I feel like because I haven't been living in New York full-time, I go back a lot, but then I become a foreigner in two places. And I think what happens is your understanding of how you're being perceived changes all the time, just as it is in our personal lives. We did an exhibition with Hale Tenger in 2015 in New York, and it's called, "We didn't go outside, we're always on the outside, we didn't go inside, we're always on the inside."

And this work was about this sort of situation in Turkey, where a lot of Westerners think that it's so lovely, because it's an intersection of East and West. And when in fact, when the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, that it kind of closed its doors. It's not really part of the Arab world. It's not part of the Persian world. It pushed out Armenians and Greeks. So, there's a lot of suspension, liminal suspension, of being in an in-between place. So, when I showed that work in New York, it was really an eye opener for New Yorkers who came to the exhibition, and were surprised to learn that that was the case. And then it changed their view of, at some point the Galata bridge was crossed by people of many colors, and

it's not anymore. And why is that? And what does it mean if you're in New York, and what kind of travel bans there are.

So I think that sometimes being an outsider, you can say and do things that you can't if you're there, because of different kinds of cultural norms or censorship or you just don't see it, but then at the same time, you want to be respectful and work within the cultural norms, and that can actually hold you back. So I think I'm always vacillating between always being an outsider and an insider in both places. To expand a little further, when we work in other places like Lima or Bangkok, or Seoul or Paris even, or places where I don't have as much of a strong base network of people and experience there, I really do have to depend on the colleagues and artists that I'm working with to inform me and trust that they're along the way I would work if I did know the context better. I mean I think that's sort of where you're going, that there is a lot of relationship building that takes long years and lasts for years. There's a lot of just like jumping out of the airplane and hoping the parachute opens and rolling with it, where that's the renegade part that maybe another organization would never do.

##AK
No, that's really great to hear. And I think before we go further in that direction, I'd love to spend a little bit more time talking about your relationship between Turkey and the US because it's also a such an origin story for you in terms of the organization and your own personal life. I think so often we might be tempted to say, "Well, how has your work been impacted by the shifting political situation in Turkey?" but you have often remarked in interviews, rightly, "Well, we also have to look at the shifting context in the US," which I think, especially in our present moment, is very hard to ignore. So, I'd be curious to hear a little bit about how your work has been impacted by both of those political contexts. And maybe what it has prompted for you, working between two different sites, what new questions it might have raised for you, or different methodologies, and maybe different pathways, it's opened up for you, or pressures?

##MS
There's definitely something about working in New York, which is so great, there's so many things available, but there's an oversaturation where you feel like it's great, all my other colleagues are covering this, you know, there's so many talented, gifted people from all over the world there. When I was in Turkey, I felt like especially at that time in 2007, there's space to build things and do things. And so that was really attractive to me. But this idea that Turkish people would say to me, like "You live in New York, why would you come here? You know, we're trying to get out of here, that it's better place." I think that's a fallacy, where there's, of course, really hard things about New York and really hard things about Istanbul. But my idea was to try to figure out what are the good things about each place, and then work on… You can't really do fundraising in Istanbul, it's super hard. SAHA association is the only granting organization here. There's a lot more opportunities to get support, financial support, and even colleague support, in New York. But then there's a lot of freedom and space, and there are so many interesting writers and curators and artists working in Istanbul, that are very dynamic. Because it is changing, and because it is shifting really fast. And there was a lot of political activity that creates a different dynamic.

But ultimately, I think to answer your question *really,* the way it's changed for me, personally, of being excited coming to Istanbul, falling in love with the city, when I first went to New York, falling in love with New York and having this like, "I want to have two love affairs." But also that nowhere is great

and everywhere is horrible, the world is getting even more intense. That no matter where you are, you can't go anywhere that's better, because everywhere is horrible. No matter where you are, you just have to make it as good as you can. Which I think you know, a lot of us are coming to these conclusions that, "What can I do to make it good as I can get in New York? And how can I make it as best as I can in Istanbul?"

That's why I think this having this communication with people in other places, there is something I don't know what's going on in the human mind. Across all geographies and all time, human beings have wanted to be in touch with people across geographies. It's just part of how we function, we need our intimate local view, we also need to know what's going on in other places. And so I think that's part of… is it possible to be in touch across geographies? After the Zoom thing, after the you know, with all of our books and all of our WhatsApps? And how can we really be in touch in a fruitful way? If staying where we are for eco crisis situations, visas, economic reasons, then we have to try to stay in touch with each other across distances. I think that's getting even more urgent, like this ability to all go to Venice or Documenta is going to like shrink and shrink. But with that, how can we still be connected to people in different places and share knowledge and share camaraderie because it's essential to the human existence. That's the idea of being mindfully local and globally interconnected. That's where this comes from.

##PT
Mari, I think that's such a wonderful sentiment and in thinking about this question you raised with connection and relation across distance, it reminded me of something you said a little earlier about trust with some of the places that you work with, where you don't have necessarily an on the ground presence. And I think we were both interested in how you build that kind of trust and that connection.

##MS
I think it's the way we build trust in interpersonal relationships. One way is getting to know someone slowly over time. We had a really great collaboration with Alexie Glass-Kantor and Artspace Sydney but I got to know her slowly over the years because she was working for Art Basel Hong Kong when I was doing conversations for Art Basel. The other way is through like when a friend introduces you to a friend and you trust your friend, so you trust the new person. For example, with *A Few in Many Places*, I met Abhijan Toto at an ICI curatorial intensive, so since Renaud Proch is someone I trust, he's on our advisory committee, introduced me to Abhijan, he came with already like a stamp of approval. So it was easier for me to trust him and work together and more quickly. Plus, he's so wonderful anyway. And then that meant that if I'm going to collaborate with Abidjan, then I'm going to trust the people he brings on, he's been building trust with them. So it becomes this web, which goes back to this thing we were talking about. As you exist for a longer amount of time, the idea is that the organization has to get bigger and bigger. So you get bigger grants, you get a bigger staff, you get a bigger building, and all this kind of stuff. But instead, maybe the ambition could be to be more like mycelium. Instead of getting bigger, we spread out further. And in the spreading out, we nurture each other equally, so that we all grow across a bigger geographic distance, instead of just becoming bigger in one place. And the network is like non-hierarchical, so we're all getting nurtured equally the way mycelium actually works. So I think this trust comes from there's links of trust, right? I trust you, you trust Alex, Alex trusts Michelle, we all like build on these things. And so we're all linked together in a certain way.

##AK

That's a really beautiful sentiment, Mari. And I think it leads really beautifully into the project *A Few in Many Places* and I'd love to hear a little bit more about what prompted that. If you can tell us a little bit more about the structure of that project? In our current moment, where we're all thinking about how to make the art world less wasteful, thinking about resources… Also, at the moment of the pandemic, where we wanted to stay connected, but couldn't physically gather together, perhaps that's some of the backdrop to some of the strategies that you've been working out in these other locales?

##MS
Yeah, I mean, I think that it was a maturation in a way, of things that Protocinema had already been doing by commissioning artists in different cities, but I would go there, and it would be spaced out over time, like we did probably four commissions a year, which also included the emerging curator series. When the pandemic came in 2020. And I saw all of our esteemed colleagues and institutions with lots of resources, doing lots of online programming, I felt that it was really essential to maintain interpersonal relationships, person-to-person relationships. And so that's what drove me primarily. And we knew that we could not make a big group show with lots of artists and lots of people come. But what we could do is what we were doing was reflecting in our personal lives, we could get one or two or three people together in a small place in our neighborhood. So why don't we multiply that do this intimacy in a multiplicity and do it in many places at the same time.

For *A Few in Many Places*, one of the things was, we didn't want it to be primarily online, we really, really wanted to be in person. And because of the whole concerns about exploitation and extraction, we really wanted there to be no shipping and no flying. So the way we did it is, the first year I commissioned artists in five different cities, to do an intervention in a place in their own neighborhood that would was open anyway, during the pandemic, like a bakery or a bakkal, or put it in the window of a bar or something that was not going to get closed down because of the pandemic. It was something that the person could just walk to. And so we gave the artists a fee, we gave them a little bit of money to make the thing, we give them money to have a colleague, whether a friend or whether it's a writer, or a curator, just a friend, help them because we don't want people to do things on their own—you need a comrade, and also obviously someone to photograph it, take pictures and stuff. But then I knew I wanted these things to be interconnected, so then I started *Protozine* in which we commissioned writers, not in the same city as the exhibition, to write about it. So, they'd be writing about it from a faraway place. So the audience would see when they went to each exhibition, that there was this thing going on in other places. And so it kind of created this sense of, "Oh, we're not alone. We're doing it with other people as well."

After that, when we decided to do it again, we thought we'd expand on this idea. And that's why I invited Abhijan Toto to co-curate it with me. And so the next one, we brought on people that he knew, people that I knew, we did it in six cities. And we did more podcasts and talks and things like that, and the zine was not as primary. We expanded our relationships, we expanded our cities, met lots of new people, because we were a lot on Zoom and stuff. The two big questions are the things we touched on a little bit earlier: What do people really need in each place? In addition to funds, like what do they need? And we're still kind of like working on this. This is something I'd love to workshop more in the future. Maybe do convenings, brainstorm from different places, what people need on the ground in addition to funding. Then the other one is: Is it really possible to be connected across geographies? Because what I found is that the people that I'm talking to on Zoom or phone are people that usually you know already.

There was this possibility where people during the pandemic were meeting new people because they were able to go to talks online. And people that might've not been invited to talk because people don't have funding to fly them were getting invited, because it was okay for online talks. So how do we keep up those relationships with people that you've never met in person? So, these are the two really big questions from that. I think it worked. I'd like to do it again. But I think it needs to also change to what the conditions are now. I think that there's ways to expand on instruction art, maybe the person giving the instructions, it doesn't have to be exactly perfect like a Sol LeWitt, it may be the person who's executing it has more of a weigh-in on what the materials are, but what's available where they are, or how it's going to be read in that place. And that could be more like a collaboration across distances. Like, there's lots of different ways to work on that. But yeah, I think there's a possibility to rethink it, and so that's what we're kind of cooking right now.

##PT
You mentioned audience there. And maybe this also goes back to what you were saying about responsiveness. But sort of generally, who do you see as Protocinema's audience and community? And how do you identify who those audiences or those communities are going to be in a particular context?

##MS
We're an art organization, we mostly serve the art community. Most of the people come to see our exhibitions or follow us on social media and read our texts and stuff, tend to be people in the art community in New York and Istanbul, and then places where we've done shows. It's kind of funny, like, once you do a show somewhere, then people start to have you more on their radar. So, we have people that are following Protocinema in different parts of the world, but they're mostly already in the art field. And they tend to be young, of course there's people my age, like in their 50s, but they tend to be in their 20s and 30s. And I know they're there, because I see them when they come to the shows, or we see them responding to our emails and our you know, digital discourse, and so forth.

But then, of course, the thing when I talk about local, when you're somewhere and you're doing a show, the art community shows up, but there's a self-selecting of who's kind of art curious. And so sometimes it might be just people who are in the neighborhood, like when we did the Trevor Paglen show in Dolapdere in Istanbul, there were kids that kept coming in that lived in the neighborhood who were super mesmerized by his work, and they kept bringing their friends, they were like our biggest promoters. There's a bunch of kids making drawings of satellites now. You can go with an intention of having impacts, and you know part of what's going to happen, but just like making art is an unexpected part, that's super magical, you need to let that happen. Because otherwise, there's no space for learning and opening up.

##AK
I personally feel very lucky that I got to see that Trevor Paglen installation with you. So, I can imagine the kids running in and looking at it because it was quite spectacular. But I guess, you know, maybe to push a little harder on your notion of dispersion as an organization. And, also working in locales where you physically don't even travel because of these links of trust that you've established, how does it come back under the fold of Protocinema when it lands in the local spot that is already maybe removed from you, and to a degree the organization? How does it come back in as part of Protocinema? How does that become legible to maybe your core audience that follows what you're doing all over the world, and also on the ground locally?

##MS
Well, that's very interesting, because, for example, with Jorge Gonzalez, I met him through Abhijan. And then we started talking a lot. You know, you're having these crazy WhatsApps and Zooms, and you're working on a project together and weighing in and going and getting support because you're fundraising for it. And you're talking about the ideas. And then you develop a relationship, you see each other. And when we're in New York, and he's in New York, we see each other and it's kind of like crazy, because we've been talking for so many years. From that relationship, things grow. And now we're including him in this upcoming project we'll talk about a little later on. So those build on each other.

Or maybe there's artists in Seoul that I didn't get to meet that were part of the second *A Few in Many Places*, they made this beautiful project, and our audience sees it on our digital platforms. But I didn't get to meet the audience. So, I hope someday when I go there, I'll get to meet them. And we learned a lot from talking back and forth. And all these kinds of things, how to explain this artwork in a press release kind of conversations. It's really mind blowing.

Also, as far as impact, I think that stuff has to unfold over time. I know a colleague I met when he was 19, from Damascus, who came to Istanbul. And he wasn't part of the art field and started working with us and ended up making a show in our emerging curators series in 2015. And just finished his undergrad in Tokyo and learned Japanese, and like you have to let this idea of impact unfold over time. I don't know if it can be like exactly measured and stuck in a box.

##PT
I know you touched briefly there on some of your upcoming projects. And one I wanted to ask you about is *Protodispatch*, which I know you're doing in partnership with Laura Raicovich. My understanding is that it encourages both interdisciplinarity, but also this sort of geographic multiplicity. And I'm just wondering if you could say something about how those two things relate?

##MS
Yes, the idea is that maybe we could do better than *Protozine*. How can we keep responding to what's happening? Laura had this great idea, which we're now doing called *Protodispatch*, where we're commissioning artists to either write a text or make a video, or maybe images with text, that we're going to dispatch each month, about whatever's in the artists area of expertise. So, Jorge Gonzalez is doing this about collaboration and mutual learning, and all the kinds of work he's been doing in Puerto Rico, in Santurce. But written from the position of where they are in the ground, in their particular part of the world. We'll launch that on our communication channels.

And also the way that *Protocinema* would make exhibitions in different places, is somewhere in the space between reportage and artwork. It's in that space in between. So *Artnet* will also publish it. We're going to launch it in September, but this way, we're hoping to put it on our networks and share it with other networks—bridges of this global interconnectedness. So, we're sharing these issues that are quite urgent and political.

##AK
One of the questions that I think a lot of us have in working contexts that are outside of our home spaces, is how not to reify colonial models? Or the kind of art world tourism that we see or even the kind

of globalized models of the early 2000s. And it seems like one of the things that you're really hitting home is the importance of relationships and long-term dialogues. I'm personally very interested in how that works organizationally. You've mentioned before that you are maybe trying to "uninstitutionalize," that you're not trying to replicate the models that are out there already, that you're not trying to be another kunsthalle, etc. And you've talked to this idea of adding on in a relational way. And I would love to hear more about your understanding of your organization in relationship to others. Not just your individual relationship with artists and curators, but organizationally, do you have relationships? Does your organization have feelings and thoughts and a perspective of where it fits in? Maybe in this kind of larger ecology of arts organizations?

##MS
I love that you ask that because that's a question that I struggle a lot like who are my peers? And it's not because I think I'm peerless. But I think it's because I don't know lots of organizations that are doing things that I'm doing. But that said, I was lucky enough to do an ICI Curatorial Intensive in 2012. Of course, ICI has been a big hero. I think one thing that sounds really weird, but is true, is my agenda is for you to have *your* agenda. And part of the whole thing is stepping out of the way. And maybe because my peers, as artists are really great artists, my peers as gallerists all now have their own galleries or are the directors of major galleries. My peers as curators, like people my age, you know, I've only been doing this like 10 years, they've been doing this for like 30 years. Maybe that's why I feel really comfortable working with younger curators, because I have the same amount of experience as them. And also because it's super exciting to create a space where it's more about individuals having a support structure to do our own thing, as opposed to us all galvanizing under one kind of leadership. It's a non-institution, institution, it's something that is taking on a different kind of physicality, a different kind of presence. Even an idea of slowing down and maybe doing it less frequently, but building in more time for research and interim convening, and obviously fundraising, so that we have all the money before we start commissioning. In the past, I was commissioning as I was running down the street, and fundraising while it's all happening.

These are super precious things. We don't want to break these precious things. So, I might be having more like a band of lone wolves than having a quote unquote "institution." But that's what it looks like now. And maybe it will change in the future when we start to bring in different things.

I think we started to talk a little bit about personal interests weighing in, in terms of what are the needs now. When we look at all the things that have happened in the past few years, there was definitely a lot of loss and grief and a need to talk more about living and dying in a way that's not death denial and "it's horrible and creepy" and support each other through these kinds of things. I know that you know, for example, the artist Every Ocean Hughes is addressing this in a really strong way. Maybe there's an intersection of art that can do this in a way that's going to be filling a gap that might be needed and to help maybe cross-cultural work. How this in different countries could be really beneficial for each other. I think I digress. But I think that that might be the most interesting part.

##PT
I know one thing as I'm listening to you talk about your curatorial practice that comes to mind is how many different things you have going on—you sound busy, like you have *a lot*. And I was wondering if you could maybe say a little bit about how many projects you typically work on at any given time? And,

and how would you go about choosing what you're going to work on and where it's going to be sited and who you're going to work with?

##MS
I know it does sound like a lot, but it's not really. In the beginning, I started doing two shows in Istanbul and two shows in New York a year. And then slowly, I started getting pulled to doing things in different places, Tbilisi, Lima, Paris. Then just shifting the ideas, we started in 2015 an emerging curator series, which was really great, because there was so many young people that I was working with that wanted to have opportunities, and I had these possibilities. And then I started building relationships with them. And you know, Alper Turan, did a show with us in the beginning of 2021. And we work together so well that I hired him and now he's working with us, as well as doing his own independent curating. And he has a show right now at A Tale of A Tub in Rotterdam.

As time progressed, we tried to have a structure where there would be a theme for each year, we tried to stretch out the geography, so it was not so back and forth, and slowed things down a little. Then in 2017, we started the screening tour, which is one hour of curated, single-channel videos, so we could spread them around. It's like sharing a Dropbox. And you could have different institutions in different places, show it—show it outside, show it inside. But now with *A Few in Many Places*, that started to kind of take the place of some of the commissions and now I'm considering slowing things down even more. So that after we do our show in September and launch *Protodispatch—Protodispatch* will continue, that's a long-term project. But maybe we figure out a way to lean into more research, and making something that puts all these things together in a way that happens less frequently in multiple places? And maybe we do it in more places but with more time?

It's like that thing of "How you live your day is how you live your life." If I don't want to run around to 8 million shows, if I say I want to do a show in somewhere, and also experience it and be present, I have time to do studio visits and not have to rush around, then I go home and I sleep and I think and I digest it, then I can do something in another place. It doesn't have to all be squished together. I don't know, I'm kind of thinking out loud here. But I think that to answer your question, "How do we decide it?" you know, we do it year-by-year. So, it changes as you go along. And that's a great thing about being so tiny is we can be super responsive. We don't lock things in. That's the upside of doing things with less money as you're beholden to structures. Maybe that's the thing.

##AK
That actually prompts a couple of questions for me. Picking up on the mycelium, and this dispersion, and how originally you were really thinking between Istanbul and New York and servicing a more localized community on some level. And now with your expansion to other locales, when you do a project let's say, for example, in Lima, will you do a project again in Lima? Or is it a one-off situation? Or is it about creating a route there and building future projects from that?

##MS
It's the second. Once I do something somewhere, I like to keep going back and engage in different ways. With Lima, for example, after we did this show with Proyecto AMIL, I knew the work of Ishmael Randall Weeks for a long time and admired it. And he's there now. And so, he's also going to be in *Protodispatch*, like, I'm not going to go and physically make a show and Lima immediately, but that was

2017. I'm working with an artist from there to engage in our *Protodispatch* project. So, it comes in lots of different forms.

##AK
It seems like it has that, not to use another early 2000s kind of metaphor, rhizomatic aspect, right? Where you're now planting these seeds in different places, and they could maybe connect. But just to pick up on another thing you mentioned is that question of funding. You mentioned how nimble and responsive you can be, but often—and you mentioned this in the very beginning about the question of audiences and communities—funders often want to put you in a box. So how do you as an organization navigate that kind of real structural support you need while also working outside of the kind of molds that a lot of funders expect you to fit?

##MS
Well, that's the thing, we haven't fit the mold so we don't have the funding. No, we have some like really amazing funders like the Foundation for Arts Initiatives believes in us because they support things that are outside the box, for sure, and in working in different regions. So, it's about the old adage of "Don't program for funding, get funding for program." And so there's a lot of individual support, especially for *Protodispatch*, we have lots of amazing individuals that are supporting it now, and then searching for, or having conversations with, colleagues at foundations, that maybe they change to fit our model, instead of us changing to fit their model. And getting the people at the foundations to understand that keeping these nationalist confines (like American organizations will only support you if you do something in America) there's a lot of really nationalist confines to funding. The way that governments are going in the world right now, it's even more important to have cross-cultural discourse and transnational discourse.

So, I think that what we'll do is create opportunities for other people to change, to follow us in also being inventive and creative like, you know, what if you're going to really be like punk rock about it and say, "I don't want to be an institution." There is a nonprofit in Mexico that gets its funding by selling tequila, they produce their own tequila. You have to be more inventive. There's opportunities in the hemp business, there's opportunities to create services that maybe we don't realize within our mission, that also generate support, I think getting really creative about it. And it's like that permaculture thing, also, not having the needs for huge monies, means I'm going to reuse that flat screen 800 times, I'm going to drag it all over. I've always got a video projector in my suitcase. It's about choosing where your priorities are. And like we were talking too, if you really prioritize the person, the object and the process equally, then what does that look like? That looks like I'm spending most of my money paying people fairly, and I don't have as much money left over to have a chic party. That's okay. Because that's part of our ethos.

##PT
To follow up on this line around ethos and fairness, I read an interview you gave, I think with *Ocula*, and you were sort of talking about the spaces that Protocinema partners with, spaces that are sort of open during and in spite of the various crises of our time. What have these crises and their accompanying shifts, from the pandemic to broader calls for racial justice, etc., from the past few years meant your organization or its structure? Have there been changes in response?

##MS

Oh, yeah. What's happened is, I think you guys probably see this too, is people understand that because there are fewer resources, you have to collaborate more. Opportunities that might not have been available before or we just didn't think of them before, have become available. And it's been really amazing. Like we partner with this literature house here, Kiraathane, and it was such a great experience and I never really thought about doing something in there because it's like a safe haven for writers in Istanbul. Then Koray Duman introduced us to the Clemente in the Lower East Side, which mostly serves the Latinx community. And we did our emerging curator show there with Lila Nazemian
And it was awesome, because their director Libertad really wanted access to our audience. And we really wanted access to their audience.

It was something that maybe we were so busy before, running and doing our own things we didn't really think about so much. And it's a beautiful old building that has like 70 artists' studios, subsidized studios upstairs, that I used to do studio visits with in the 1990s. And it's a really special, awesome place. And even people in the New York art community were like, "How did you find this place?" Of course, some people knew about it. But some people, they didn't realize it was there. So, you're kind of revealing yourself to each other. And I think it's this whole thing of like, what's his name, wrote that article in *The New York Times* a couple of days ago about being so busy, that you're so busy, you're so busy, but you actually, what are we doing? And so, I think with this, of putting our arms down, and "We're in a complete crisis; We don't have enough resources; We have to share.' that this has made really amazing things happen. I say make the best of it.

##AK
I agree wholeheartedly, and I'm really eager for you to help us chart the path forward. I think, going back to that question of working in relation, and you talked about camaraderie. That really feels like part of what we talk about when we talk about the future, for me at least, about organizations thinking more collaboratively, authorship being more dispersed, being more cooperative. I'd love to hear more about that idea of camaraderie between organizations because I think we're coming out of a moment when maybe branding and ownership were at the forefront for a lot of organizations, which does tie to questions around white supremacy and capitalist culture that are really actually detrimental to a lot of artistic practices and resource sharing. What I hear a lot from publics asking of organizations, is to be more vulnerable, to be more transparent, to be more in relation, and to be more open to not having all of the answers. If you could expand a little bit on how that kind of camaraderie, that network, that working in relation operates for you in this next chapter of Protocinema?

##MS
Those are all really good points. I think that it also involves the way we evolve our personal relationships, where maybe before there was a feeling, "I need to do business with this person, because they have resources, or they have prestige. And even if I don't like them, I have to do it." I think that that's all shifting, now we're saying, "I want to work with people that I actually like, and I want to actually spend time with, and I don't care about all these other things," and that by banding together, we can actually do really interesting things, and we'll get the resources, it'll be fine. That means having more agency to choose who we work with, because that's what we're going to be spending our life with. Because that's what we do. And that separating work and life like, "I'll work with these jerks. And in my personal life, I'll have like wonderful friends that I believe in and trust," is not okay anymore. That I have to also work with people that I believe in and trust, and they're not going to screw me over or talk shit behind my back, they're going to treat people the way we think that people should be treated, is a

priority, and we're willing to pay the cost that goes with it. And then also, ultimately, people really reveal their true selves over time anyway, there's always going to be conflicts, but how we navigate conflict resolution is a key thing. And so, there's misunderstandings, there's conflicts, there's seeing things different ways, especially when you're working in different cultures and cross-generationally and so forth. And saying, "Okay, let's sit and talk about it" is the only way. And if you can't talk about it, then the relationship doesn't exist, or it doesn't grow. I think it's kind of just being more personal ultimately.

##PT
To return back to something you said earlier, you were talking about this idea of "uninstitutionalizing." I know we've touched on that a little, but I would love if you could just expand a little bit on that, because I was so captivated when I first heard you use that phrase. I would love to hear a little more about what it means for you.

##MS
It kind of feels like the Big Bang, like the universe is expanding and everything is breaking, this thing of having a building with people with specific roles in it, that just keeps going on and on the same for a long time, is can almost like feel like cracking open, like you're in a video game. And that actually what we are is people that all have creative ambitions and visions, and we do it in discourse, in harmony with each other. And we actually are really interconnected, we're not separate from each other. And that it's just going to become an expanded space of interrelated activity. And hopefully, we get to a point where we're sharing resources so much, we don't even have to talk about it anymore. And there are no boundaries and lines.

##AK
That's the world I want to live in Mari. I want to know, as Protocinema has changed—I mean, it has its core ethos—but as its changed in the last decade, I feel like the decade mark for an institution or organization, or an "uninstitution" in your case, is a really important reflective point to think back on—where you've been, where you want to go. I know that in your personal life and interests you've been exploring other models, and how does that come together now in Protocinema at this moment when we do want to imagine and actualize different models, because we can't wait anymore? You were just speaking to that a bit. But how do you truly enact something different? And how does it need to behave? And what new needs does it need to serve?

##MS
Well, that's actually exactly where we are, like you're exactly point on Alex. We're in a feasibility stage, trying to figure out how we can do this next thing that serves all these purposes, that slows it down, that gives time for convening, that gives more time for research, that serves these personal interests of mine. I am actually interested also, in self-replication. I found this thing that was also initiated the same year as Protocinema called the Death Cafe in London. And it's just an informal organization of people that come together to talk about supporting each other around this issue. And there's a structure to it, there's a format, there's some kind of guidelines, but then people can do it and use the platform of that death cafe and do it wherever they want, and so now it's been happening in 82 countries. So, I think there is something about making something that can be replicated and collaborated on as much or as little as people want. We can support each other in ways that maybe we don't even know yet, but we're doing the feasibility research for it right now. So that's exciting. And I'm so glad you're asked me about it.

##AK
That’s great, and I think just speaking to the death cafe, I know you've been interested in death doulas and we can’t all not help but think about our own lifespans and the fragility of ecosystems and capitalist reality at this moment that we're in. To think of an organization that is more tied to life is, I think, really wonderful and hopeful. I have personally been really disappointed to see how things have been kind of snapping back to quote unquote, “normal,” despite everything that we've all collectively been through. And just seeing you trying to map out a different path is really inspiring.

##MS
Thank you. Well, let me say two things in response to that. One, is that maybe what I meant when I was talking about the death cafe was looking for examples of forms outside of the art fields, which I think lots of people do, it's not like a new original idea. But the second thing, is that I remember that in one workshop with death doulas from the University of Vermont, they were talking about how they want to have a death doula in every village all over the world. And what the person does is creates a way that the family, the person dying in the family, can get the capitalist institutions out from between them in their own loss. So, like the funeral home, the hospital, the, you know, the coffin, the grave, all of this stuff that's in between. And like all people want after they lose somebody is they wish they had more time to be in the presence with that experience.

And then I had a light go off, like, maybe that's what Protocinema can do. We can take away all the institutions between me and my art experience, or my art making, or my art showing, maybe we can have it be more like, we're just making it and showing it in a way that doesn't have to be, funded or verified by an art school or a residency program or a museum or a gallery. But of course, we love all those things. But maybe there's another option. That's why I keep talking about plurality. Maybe there's other ways to do this, that we don't have to have those institutions. Those institutions can exist, it's fine. But in addition, let's figure out a way that we have this immediacy that makes me super excited and talk really fast.

##AK
Please join us for our next and final episode of the season where I will be joined in conversation by artist, filmmaker, and activist Linda Goode Bryant and our colleagues from RAW Material Company, to reflect on the institutional exchange that took place last spring between the Dakar-based RAW Académie and the ICA in Philadelphia. Six months after the conclusion of the project, we will reunite to discuss Goode Bryant’s vision for an alternative infrastructure for the arts and what we learned from our collaboration. We look forward to welcoming you in person at ICA, please visit our website, www.icaphila.org. for more information about our upcoming exhibitions and programs. I'd like to thank Jason Moran for the original music and my colleagues at ICA who helped make this podcast possible. Derek Rigby, Audio Visual Coordinator; Jill Katz, Director of Marketing and Communications; Ali Mohsen, Digital Content Editor; Olive Martin, Social Media Coordinator, and Pelle Tracey, as well as collaborators former Spiegel-Wilks Curatorial Fellows Tausif Noor and Gee Wesley. Thank you for listening.