

Conversation with
MARIE HÉLÈNE
PEREIRA AND
DULCIE ABRAHAMS
ALTASS, RAW Material
Company

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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Marie Héléne Pereira is the Director of Programs and Dulcie Abrahams Altass is the Programs Curator at RAW Material Company, a center for art, knowledge, and society in Dakar, Senegal.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor.

ALEX KLEIN:

Can you introduce yourselves and give us a bit of an overview about the mission of RAW Material Company?

MARIE HÉLÈNE PEREIRA:

My name is Marie Héléne Pereira and I'm Director of Programs at Raw Material Company. What we would call our mission is mostly our leitmotif; we say we are "a center for art, knowledge, and society based in Dakar, Senegal." We work for a better appreciation of artistic and curatorial practice on the African continent, so we have a Pan-African vocation. Our work revolves around exhibition making and thinking between artistic practice, curatorial practice, and society to show, through different means, how much knowledge is embedded in art. We don't view art as decorative, but as a tool for thinking about the society that we live in, and the roles that we have in that society. We have programs that range between exhibition making, public talks, artist talks, residencies for artists, writing, and education through our RAW Académie program. There are also other programs we've developed that really came into being through conversation with our public and our colleagues.

DULCIE ABRAHAMS ALTASS:

Thank you, Marie Héléne, for a beautiful introduction to who we are and what we do. I'm Dulcie Abrahams Altass, and I am the Curator of Programs at RAW Material Company.

ALEX KLEIN:

You have such a clear articulation of your mission. I'm wondering if you foresee it evolving or changing in the coming year or so in response to global events, or if you feel that it's already responsive in the way that it was initially conceptualized?

DAA:

I think something that is useful to know about RAW is that thus far our mission has never changed. But the form that we give to our programs does change in order to better adapt to the contemporary moment and the necessity that we can identify at each given moment. So, I don't think that the mission of RAW will change. I think the mission of RAW is more relevant than ever, but it will be about how we continue to give shape and space to that mission when we are challenged with the difficulties coming because of COVID-19 and the effects of this health crisis.

For example, hospitality is a huge part of what we do and being in a space where people from different fields can come together and share ideas and create new meaning for contemporary society is really important. To be able to do that in a context that is quite informal, where we share food and drinks and space is very much being challenged right now. I think that while our mission won't necessarily change, we have to think about how to best maximize the space that we're very lucky to have, and we also benefit from the fact that we're in a country where the climate allows us to use outdoor space for most of the year.

Another challenge is our relationship to the international. While we have weekly programs that focus on the Senegalese context, and Dakar in particular remains the protagonist of all of our programs, we enrich our relationships with the city and other people's relationships to the city through a lot of international collaboration. We feel that we're part of an important united front with other countries in the world, so we collaborate very frequently with colleagues and friends across the planet. As is the case for many like-minded institutions, we're wondering how those links of solidarity and exchange and collaboration are going to be able to continue moving forward.

AK:

That's an excellent point. I like that your mission hasn't changed, but it's the way that

you respond to your mission that has changed. RAW was originally more of an exhibition space, and now there's this focus on the Académie, correct? This isn't to say that you're not still producing exhibitions or other public-facing projects, but now this pedagogic aspect of your work has become more central.

Reflecting on our own collaboration between ICA and RAW there are challenges that we have faced together on an institutional level. We're running into the frustrations not just of different bureaucracies coming into contact with each other, but now a very real dismantling of a global *infrastructure* that we had been relying on to bring everyone together in a physical space. At this moment things that we formerly took for granted, like securing visas or even just booking a plane ticket, are extraordinarily difficult.

MHP:

We really take our mission as part of our identity as an institution. We were established in a way that was not based on specific programs, but on a general idea of what the institution would like to contribute to not only Dakar, but to the African continent. At every step, we're always rethinking how we approach what is happening around us, but also, as Dulcie said, how we put our collective thinking into our programs. This gives RAW a really strong identity that doesn't bend, per se, but that can be expressed in different ways. In the case of the pandemic, what was very challenging for us at the very beginning was that we wanted both our team and public to be safe knowing the way this virus spreads, the only solution that we found at that time was to pause. Of course, there were government mandates to not hold any public gatherings and to close spaces like RAW, but even before that was declared, it was clear to us that we couldn't move forward as we wanted to or as we were used to. For us what was important was the human, who is in front of

us and what kinds of interactions we want with that person. This is all just to say that it's been very challenging from the beginning of the pandemic and it's still very challenging. We're thinking about next steps for different programs, the next steps for our space being a hub for everybody to come and work and be in dialogue with us and contribute to the public program. While a lot of things have gone online, it's been a very slow process because we don't really know how to put all those programs online. We've managed to come up with propositions that have worked very well, and if you look at those propositions, you'll see that hospitality is still at the core of what they were.

TAUSIF NOOR:

We really appreciate the centrality of hospitality in our own collaboration with you. As you said, I think the pandemic has really revealed for us, too, the limits to collaboration. If we think of ourselves as part of a "global" network, where do we come up against such limits to collaboration, and how do we overcome them without sacrificing our core values?

The theme of this next Académie, led by Linda Goode Bryant, is Infrastructure, and I wanted to think together about how we can address the challenges and possibilities of infrastructure differently in light of the pandemic. Your presentation at the Dhaka Art Summit this past February touched on this quite a bit. Maybe we can start by thinking about infrastructure broadly, and then very specifically with our collaboration.

DAA:

What is very positive in my eyes is that the conceptual proposition of infrastructure is one which made perfect sense to both institutions, but is a theme which has, in the last number of weeks, finally started to gain currency

amongst a wider public. What I mean by that is that an institution like RAW was created to develop a different type of infrastructure in the arts and in the knowledge economies of North America and Europe, which continue to have too much influence over artistic practice and critical thinking on the African continent today. I think it's really powerful to see in the last few weeks, with the enormous Black Lives Matter protests that have been happening all across the globe, this awakening of people who benefit from white privilege to the dangers of infrastructure and the necessity to create new infrastructures. It's lifted the lid on a subject that's always been at the heart of what we do, and at the heart of what Linda does, and is also at the heart of what I think the *I is for Institute* project is about. That's really powerful.

MHP:

Definitely. When you are working in collaboration, you are embracing different perspectives, different ways of doing based on past experiences, on the realities of different contexts, etc. So the collaboration becomes a meeting point where, for each of the protagonists, there is a need to open up and there is a need to be more flexible in order for that meeting point to have a good and smooth form, if I can put it like that.

What Linda is proposing in her curriculum has been an exercise for each of us—for us at RAW, for ICA I think, and also for herself—because it has put us in a place where we really have to hear or listen to each other in order to be able to move forward. I think that's been the most powerful part of all of this, the process. The process of making this happen, and it's still ongoing, for me it's the most powerful part, because we've gone through challenges, but we've gone through situations where we really realized, "OK, everything that we've been putting effort into is happening." We're not a hundred percent there yet, but we've seen that the process was so enriching in both ways: enriching in terms of knowing more about other types of infrastructures, how they function, and how different they are from our own, but also enriching because we're learning from each other and our collective ability to make it happen. I think that's very powerful as an experience already, before the actual session starts.

AK:

Even if there hadn't been a pandemic, we would have had our own set of challenges, which are infrastructural. We often think about how individual workers within institutions actually have a certain fluidity and agency that can be

harnessed to change structures from within (acknowledging of course that some institutions are more malleable than others). In this case it is about another organization taking root within our own system. If at the end of this exchange ICA even ends up doing one small thing differently going forward it will actually be a huge accomplishment. It will mean that through our collaboration we have changed as an institution—it will have moved this machine somehow.

DAA:

That really touches on what I was thinking about, which was how getting to this stage and working on the program at ICA right when the pandemic hit has shown how we're in a nesting doll of infrastructures and it's given new meaning to the concept as well. The concept shifts from being a reflection on infrastructure in the art world—and in particular, this coming together of practices by Linda, ICA, and RAW, and the infrastructure that these three institutions have created—to one that is in a very acute way being impacted by the reverberations of the virus on all of the other infrastructures within which we are imbedded.

TN:

One of the aspects of RAW that I find quite motivational is that the discussions you have during the Académie are meant to exceed the bounds of just the session. The people who are participating, the students, the session leaders, are meant to go back out into the world and apply the new things that they've learned or adapt their practices or shift their kind of thinking in real material ways, right? What are the "raw materials" that we use to build infrastructures within our learning

and discourse and how do we make these transformations? What we've been sort of forced to do in this period is to think even more urgently about how our discourse has material impacts. I think that's always been a central aspect of RAW — that discourse is productive, it results in change, it results in people shifting their own communities outside of just the classroom. We're thinking really critically about all of these things that are happening outside of our control with the pandemic, and it makes us reconsider what it is that we can control and what we can actually do.

AK:

And what it is that we value, right? I mean, it's never felt more important to be able to gather in person, yet it's the very thing that we cannot do.

MHP:

Sometimes, and I'm sure it happens with Dulcie as well, when I am in conversation with a past participant of RAW Académie, be it a fellow, faculty member or director, they always come back to what influences they had during their time at the Académie and about how it has impacted some aspects of their practice. So, the Académie is not only a space of learning just for the fellows, but a space of learning for us at RAW, the team members, the faculty members, and the directors themselves. This also means that the learning they carried from the Académie works as a tool to face what is coming next, and I find that very interesting. I remember talking to one of the directors and he was telling me that the two or three projects he completed after his Académie session had a form that was imagined during the session through different conversations and encounters with people who were not a part of the session themselves, but who were a part of our context, through different experiences that happened during their time here. That is the type of learning that you can't even trace—you can know about it from one

conversation to another, but it's not something which you can put a finger on.

DAA:

If I can just expand on one of the points that you made, Marie H el ene, which is the impact that it has on us as staff at RAW—and I think that it's interesting to bring this up in the context of the ICA's programs as well—is that with every Acad emie session, as we welcome in a new director who brings into this space their way of doing things, we have to adapt to their vision, their way of being hospitable. Each time, we have to negotiate within our institution of how far we adapt and how flexible we can be without infringing on the identity of RAW and the sort of core identity and core beliefs and standards that we have.

TN:

Right.

DAA:

That's always a challenge, no matter how wonderful a director is, but I think that what it does is allow for constant self-criticism within the institution of RAW, because it's constantly being called into question through the Acad emie process.

AK:

Maybe we can talk about how this is pushed further as a result of the pandemic. Because it touches on some of the things that you both brought up earlier in terms of thinking about the flexibility of your institution and the importance of hospitality. There is this very real problem right now regarding gathering and travel. What does RAW look like if you can't hold a session in person in the next year or so? I know that you've already had to delay a couple of your Acad emies. How does that work for you as an institution or an organization?

MHP:

That's a very difficult question, and I'm not sure if we have the answer now because it's just so difficult to think about, for instance, what a session would be with no physical interaction. We can't imagine a session happening online; it wouldn't be a RAW Académie session. I really don't think that the online space is the space to have an Académie session.

But this is also about us being mindful about what we would like to do in the case of this session, and it makes us think more about the future. What would happen if really in the next 12 months there is no possibility to travel? Does it mean that everything we're going to do will be Dakar-centered? Or Senegal-centered? Does it mean that we will have to change everything and force the online programming, as we saw in many cases? There are a lot of questions, and I don't have the answers right now. Physical interaction is so important to what we do as art professionals that it's hard to imagine how we will work without that possibility. We are still receiving invitations to participate in programs abroad. People are still pushing on, saying: "Maybe we'll be able to travel by October." But we don't know, and we should be prepared for what comes next, if for instance, the travel ban isn't lifted.

DAA:

It's the million-dollar question, I think. But one thing that I'm quite sure of moving forward is that a lot of people are going to move outside. I think we're going to rediscover a lot of outdoor spaces, and we're very lucky because we have a lot of outdoor spaces that we use quite frequently, but even in the immediate moment, we are looking at how to maximize that outdoor space so that nature can play a bigger role in making that space healthy and curative and so that we can still have people come and use the space of RAW in a safe environment where they can be at a relative distance. I don't know either, but as Marie Héléne said, we're planning, we're forging ahead, but who knows. I do think, in general, there will be a move toward the outdoors.

AK:

I think there's an awareness that we're in the middle of something and no one really knows where it's going, so it's interesting to hear different people's reflections and reactions to it. It also brings up questions of health and wellbeing. In the last year or two, at least in the US, a lot of institutions have been really concerned with self-care

as a philosophical question, but there's also the question of the well-being of workers. It's very interesting to think about this idea of health as actually having a very different quality. So, when you're talking about moving outdoors and thinking about hospitality as keeping people safe and healthy, it points to how this is a particularly charged moment for these questions. I want to probe a little bit deeper about how this may or may not be manifesting itself in your work at RAW.

MHP:

The question of health and wellbeing is very important, especially because, as you mentioned, there are two different ways to reflect on this. For us, the minute when these things happened and everything was shutting down, we closed the space and we started working from home. We made a system where we would alternate coming in each day just to check on the space. What was important for us was that we didn't start paying differently for instance, the fact that we are working from home shouldn't justify that. It's sad but we saw that happening in many institutions.

In bigger institutions, people who were not permanent staff lived with the threat of losing their positions because there wasn't a system that could allow them to continue being part of the team. And in some places, it was just not possible to be there, so they had to close, and everyone that was working there just had to stop. We really didn't want those extreme situations for our team members, and it was the very first point that we started working on, discussing ways our funders and people who support us could help to ensure that those situations won't happen.

We decided to temporarily close the space but to have a sustained newsletter that would really keep our publics and our audiences informed. We really worked to make the newsletter more creative and started digging into our archives and some past talks and conferences and other programs and to share those again so people who couldn't make it at the time could have the opportunity to watch or even watch it again. We opened other spaces in the newsletter where we would invite our friends and colleagues to contribute, looking at the creative ways they have adapted in this time of the pandemic. Some people reacted to the pandemic in a very, very creative way.

Simon Benjamin who is a student at Hunter College in New York, started an Instagram page with a phone number and invited people to call him and leave a voice message. It's really powerful when you go to the page and listen to it. Another colleague of ours, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, started sharing some music from his library, and he did that for more than 60 days. Every day he would present one album from an artist and he would give a full biography of the artist and say how his youth has been influenced by listening to that artist and so on. When you see the comments, you see that those different propositions became meeting points for many who were sharing about their experiences. We also opened a space for Chus Martínez who did a series of "Corona Tales," and every day she would provide a tale that is mostly her talking about her experience of that day or the day before in relation to all the thinking that she's doing during the time of the pandemic, for instance. For us, these initiatives were a way of caring for our team members on the one hand, but also for our audience.

DAA:

All of these different parameters of health and wellbeing are being unveiled and complicated, because in order to keep our physical health intact, we've had to sacrifice many aspects of our wellbeing. On the flipside, those of us who are lucky enough have maybe finally had the time to explore aspects of maintaining our wellbeing that maybe we didn't before, and I think these tensions are particularly common in the art world, where we do often give a lot of ourselves. And particularly, institutions like RAW that hold public events do a lot of these things for the wellbeing of society and sometimes we're even physically nourishing our guests, but sometimes that might be at the expense of the wellbeing of the staff. On the other hand, if you're putting on all these programs, your intellectual wellbeing is in abundance of health. All of these complexities and tensions have really come to the fore during these times, and I'm not quite sure where I sit on all of it yet and what needs to be prioritized moving forward. Especially when, here in Senegal, the call that seems to have been made by the authorities is that the impact of COVID-19 on people's physical health, given that we have a relatively young population, is likely to be quite minimal, while the impact of a lockdown on their economic health and their wellbeing could be extreme. When you have a very young population, that tends to be the case and you see these different kinds of contradictions and sacrifices are all really bubbling away right now. I think that moving forward we've got a very serious job ahead to try and prioritize within that mess, for ourselves and for our public.

TN:

We've seen many institutions respond publicly to both the

pandemic, to the Black Lives Matter protests, to the injustices that are, as you said, coming into the fore. We wanted to think about these responses from institutions—whether institutions are speaking for themselves as a unified front, but also speaking for the individuals who work within them. As an institution, RAW seems to be as much about its permanent staff as it is the extended network of directors, fellows, and researchers who comprise the RAW community. How do you think that going forward we will think about the relationship between the institution and the individual, and whether institutions can really speak for individuals?

MHP:

For us at RAW, there is no distinction between the individual and the institution. The individuals make the institution. When we think about it at an institutional level, that's mostly because we are looking at everything administratively that has to go with it, but if you come to the space or come to a program that is made by RAW, even if it's not here, you get this sense of collectivity that is happening.

I really think that also has been the way in which each of us have been "recruited." There are certain values that we look closely at when trying to grow the team and it's very important for us that people who are joining the team also have those values and if a person does not align with all of the values, then we ensure that in the fact of being with us, and being with everybody, that those values be developed or nurtured. So, it's very difficult for us to differentiate the institution and the individual.

When we think about the Académie, for instance, all of the past directors that we had and the upcoming ones are people with whom we have worked with before, or whose work we've followed very closely before, and we've invited them to be part of the journey because we saw that we share values, we share ideology, and we really share ways of doing. Maybe it's not that we share everything, but most of it, and for us that's very important and it's why we still don't want to have a selection committee for the Académie because

we know that a lot of programs work like that. You have a list of potential, let's say, directors, and then together you have to vote, and then someone comes up. For us, that's not the right way, especially for what we want to do. We prefer to invite people to come and we invite them based on previous conversations, which means that the Académie space becomes a space in which they themselves can work on proposals which they have in mind, but they will also work further on research that they started. It became a sort of investigation for the fellows who are selected, but also for the director. That's why we are always saying that it's a space for learning for everyone who's part of it.

And maybe, that's why I think that if, for instance, RAW stands for something, it means that the institution is standing *as* an institution *for* the individuals that make the institution.

DAA:

As you mentioned, a lot of institutions are making public statements and are showing, for a large part, a greater interest in the nuances of racial injustices within their institutions, collections, etc., which I think is something that should be applauded. I think it's the right thing to do. I wanted to highlight the danger of this increased interest in how racial injustices play out within and between institutions, which is that people need to be very aware of how they treat individuals. I know that at RAW, people sometimes come from institutions abroad, and they do it with the best interests at heart, but there's often an expectation that the individuals at RAW will drop everything to welcome them. Moving forward, I hope that if institutions are trying to open up to collaboration and to greater involvement, greater diversity, that's done in a way that is also very respectful of individuals and the work that they're putting into creating institutions or practice.

MHP:

I totally agree with what Dulcie is saying, and I really think that in every collaboration or relationship, at some point there will always be tension. The question then becomes: how do you react to tension? That's also something important—to know how to react to tension and to know when to decide, "OK, I'm not reacting to this anymore." And that happens. We've had guests with whom there's been a very difficult interaction, but then at some point we were like, "OK, we invited them, we are hosting them, we have to make it work." But you also have to know when to say, "This is not working and maybe it's time to let it go."

DAA:

It also raises questions about the individual and the individual's wellbeing and the institution's wellbeing and practice, and our practice—how much you have

to sacrifice one for the other, which the art world hasn't always been great at figuring out.

AK:

There's often a public perception that the individual art worker disappears behind the fold of the institution. Recently there have been increased calls to compensate artists here in the United States, and now you're also starting to see art workers unionize and trying to create more adequate and equitable working conditions. I think in the past, there was a perception that it's a "privilege" to work in the field that we work in, as opposed to thinking about the actual capital that it takes to live a life, the wellbeing that one needs to have space outside of work, and the ethics of institutions, and all of that. But perhaps that's another tangent.

I wanted to kind of pull back from the granular specificity of the individual and the institution and return to the point that you both made in the beginning about RAW's understanding of art as a tool and your desire to make new infrastructures. Given this moment that we are in, in between pro-democracy movements and public outcries about racial injustice that we haven't quite seen in our lifetimes, all compounded with these questions about health and wellbeing, how do you both think about the role of what you do as having the potential to have

an impact, and where that does
impact lie?

MHP:

That's a big one, but I think the reactions of institutions and individuals to the ongoing racism that we have to face, whether in Europe or the US or Asia, in the world at large, have been great. I'm just afraid that for many institutions it becomes a trend, and they react in a trendy way because this is what is happening now. What does it mean if you don't react? We have to react, and it's a public reaction, but everything that's happening in the institution doesn't really change much.

In the case of RAW, I think that since the beginning, for all of our programs, there has been a clear understanding of where we stand, and it's important that it doesn't move. I consider ourselves a Black institution, and though we are not in a white context, let's say, everything we experience with racism happens when we travel or when we have people who are not careful about these things, and sometimes you can feel it in statements, or in their way of doing things.

What I'm trying to say is that our programs are stemmed in this situation, so for instance, even if there hasn't been an open response from RAW. Those who are familiar with the institution know where it stands and that is the case for many other institutions that we know. We know it from their work that we see in everyday life. It's not only now that they are responding to this and if there hasn't been a public response about the George Floyd situation, there's been other responses in their programs since this started. I think that's very important.

AK:

What I hear from what you're saying is that for you, these events haven't been a sudden trigger for the institution where you need to reevaluate things—you're reaffirming that you're already doing the work; it's been ongoing.

MHP:

It's been ongoing, that's what I think. Maybe Dulcie will have another answer, but that's definitely what I think. It's been ongoing since the very beginning of the institution, in every collaboration that we have with other institutions who do not necessarily have the same views. For us, it's very important for us to put things on the table and work on them so that there isn't any misunderstanding.

DAA:

I wholeheartedly agree with Marie H el ene, and I think that it’s exemplary of what’s happening that there are institutions that are just waking up to this now, but for RAW, an art center which is all women and majority all black women, apart from myself, this is not new information. RAW is an organization that has a political position—not “politics” with a capital “P,” but in terms of, how you position yourself in the world and what you want to fight for. That’s been in the DNA of RAW since before RAW even existed as an institution, through the work and the journey of Koyo Kouoh, our founding director.

I keep thinking about a program we did in 2012, before I arrived at RAW that is extremely well known, called *Chronicle of a Revolt*, which was a sort of in-real-time photographic and literary archive of the pro-democracy demonstrations that were happening here in Senegal at the time. I’ve been part of informal conversations where institutions in other parts of the world are considering that they need to take a political stance with a capital “P.” I understand the thrust behind that, but I don’t think that it would be fair for RAW to feel under any pressure to do that, when the very existence of a space like RAW is a political act and there needs to be a level of freedom in that space that is protected.

MHP:

Members of RAW are in other contexts where there is even more tension, I mentioned the US and Europe—but when you go to South Africa, there is a lot of tension. If you talk to Koyo today and you ask her about these things, her answer will be very, very, very bold, because she faces these types of situations every day. When we talk to our colleagues from South Africa, they face these types of situations every day, so they are even more radical in what they do in terms of responding to racism. You also see it in their discourse, and you will also see it in their programs— the discourse is the program somehow, but it’s also at the granular level. For instance, in South Africa, you can barely go for a walk without being confronted with racism, it’s so embedded in the day-to-day that there is no way you don’t express it in what you do as a Black person.

TN:

Even as you do work at an international level, there are so many particulars with the institution that present new problems and new challenges, and it’s great that you are thinking at both scales at RAW.

AK:

It's been really incredible having these conversations with our colleagues all over the world because the US can be a very myopic place. There's RAW's radical idea to "dig where you stand." But you also embrace the instructive potential of doing this by working with colleagues who can look at these questions from different geographic and locational specificities. I think this helps all of us learn how to grow and reposition ourselves and is ultimately very productive.
