

Conversation with
NAIMA J. KEITH
and DIANA NAWI,
Prospect.5 New
Orleans

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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Conversation with NAIMA
J. KEITH and DIANA NAWI,
Prospect.5 New Orleans

Naima J. Keith and Diana Nawi
are the Co-Artistic Directors
of Prospect.5 New Orleans,
a citywide contemporary art
triennial.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

NAIMA J. KEITH:

I am the Co-Artistic Director of Prospect New Orleans and the Vice President of Education and Public Programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Diana and I began working on Prospect New Orleans in 2018, but we have known each other for quite a long time, and because of COVID-19 we have gone on a bit of a hiatus as Co-Directors. We have both known about Prospect as an organization and as a biennial—and now triennial—for a number of years. Prospect started out in 2008 as a biennial exhibition that was responding, on one level, to Hurricane Katrina and the massive destruction that happened in the city as a result of the hurricane, but functioned on another level as a mechanism to galvanize the arts community. The idea of bringing in an international roster of artists to engage with such a dynamic city could bring a level of attention not just to the devastation, but to the massive amount of creativity and the creative economy that already existed in the city. The first triennial was curated by Dan Cameron, who organized Prospect.1 and Prospect.2; Diana and I are now co-organizing Prospect.5.

DIANA NAWI:

I am an independent curator based in Los Angeles and with Naima, the Co-Artistic Director of Prospect.5. The theme we have developed is best articulated in the title, *Yesterday we said tomorrow*, which is a play on the title of an avant-garde jazz album released by New Orleans native Christian Scott (*Yesterday You Said Tomorrow*). We thought that changing that language subtly from “you” to “we” suggested a collective responsibility implied between “yesterday” and “tomorrow.” The implication is that of failed promises, or deferral. Importantly for us, it also positions Prospect *before* tomorrow and opens up a space of possibility—and might I say, hopefulness.

We thought about this a lot while spending time in New Orleans, a bastion of American culture that is, in many ways, *the* American city. It’s

a place where history looms incredibly large, so a lot of our thinking was situated in how the city is saturated by what is beautiful about American culture, but also all of the terrors of American history. Prospect.5 was supposed to open a week before the 2020 presidential election, so the idea that we were going to make a show that sat behind 400 years of history and brought audiences right up to what most of us would consider a major marker within contemporary history felt like a very particular mandate.

Now, of course, there's been a radical shift across the board, but I think both Naima and I have been struck by the resonance of this mandate. History is almost on a day-to-day loop, a kind of repetition with a series of ruptures and violence. Everything that we are seeing now is filled with the hopefulness of social change, but also with the trauma and violence that brought us here. We feel that the theme is sadly prescient, and I think we are just trying to figure out if this is a moment that will get us out of that loop. We selected artists that are still engaged with the role of history in the present and who will engage with New Orleans.

ALEX KLEIN:

I want to return to the framing of the exhibition and how the current climate has informed or resonated with the direction you've formulated for Prospect. But first, can you talk about how COVID-19 has affected the structure and logistics of the show itself, which is now postponed until 2021?

NJK:

We announced the artist list in early March 2020 during the Armory Show. At the time, we were in New York and the reports of COVID-19 and its impact and the possibility of shutting down the city were getting more serious. We first made the announcement in New Orleans and basically got on a plane to New York the next day. To give you a sense of how surreal it felt, we were packed inside of a small room to make this announcement while there were reports on CNN about a virus that we needed to start paying attention to. I think it was pretty soon afterwards that we started talking about what it would mean for us to postpone Prospect.

To be honest, it was something that was met with both a little bit of sadness and a little bit of disappointment. We were going full steam ahead and had been receiving some really good feedback about the artists—there were a number of artists who people were unfamiliar with and some unexpected

choices. At that point, we were knee deep in the curatorial process. But we wanted to be safe and we wanted our audiences to be safe, even though the show wouldn't open until October. I think we were being optimistic at that point about how long we were going to be quarantined, because we just had no idea. We wanted people to be able to travel to New Orleans and we didn't want to be the biennial that had a really small audience, or that no one, not even locally-based people saw, or only saw on Instagram.

DN:

I think to echo Naima's point, it became apparent that New Orleans was being hit really hard and didn't have the infrastructure to deal with the pandemic at the beginning, the federal mandate was unclear, and early on there was a lot of loss, the city lost a lot of really important culture bearers; we want to be sensitive to that context.

Prospect is a triennial that is very contingent on presence; it doesn't have a huge online platform. The catalogue is super important, but it's not the *thing*. The *thing* is the city; the *thing* is the experience; the *thing* is the gathering. I think that so many of the projects we're conceptualizing are about that and not so much about site specificity in terms of their location, but about the specificity of the whole city. The city is such an important character in the play that is Prospect, so we just want to make sure that people can be there, and it's our hope that in 2021 that they will be.

As far as our staff furloughs, we have three full-time staff and an executive director. Those three staff members will be furloughed next Friday for six months.

AK:

It's amazing that you took such quick action to postpone the opening by a year. It feels like a lot of museums are even now still debating whether to reopen this summer or fall. I think it speaks to this question of health and considering what responsibilities we have to our workers, audiences, and communities to keep them safe.

DN:

Prospect essentially consists of a board chair and an amenable board, an executive director, and Naima and myself. We had a lot of leeway to make the decision to postpone and do what we felt was appropriate. We have a very

small staff that we tried to keep on as long as possible, they had a few months in advance of the furlough. Our executive director fundraised in order to keep them on longer and while it's really not ideal for them, the whole project is suspended and this is part of that pause.

We are not a museum, and that's wonderful. We didn't have doors to shut; we didn't have to worry about the air conditioning; we don't have collections to secure; we don't have visitors who miss us. Prospect has a really nimble quality. A lack of infrastructure is often the Achilles heel of these organizations, but in this moment, it's revealed the benefits of not having a brick-and-mortar structure. It means you can act quickly if you need to. We tried to think of the staff first and then artists, just to make sure that everyone was situated and that everyone could hold tight. Those were our main points of care, which I think was a really different experience from people who work in museums.

NJK:

Part of the decision to postpone was a result of the pandemic and recognizing that Prospect is something that you really have to see physically within a neighborhood and on a specific street. But I also think that the year leading up to the triennial is a moment for fundraising for the organization, and it would have in fact been insensitive, and also nearly impossible, for us to have requested that donors fund this exhibition to happen on schedule. There was also the risk that our executive director and board would ask us to cut the show by half because of the difficulty of fundraising. And this is all to say that the decision was made not only in consideration of safety and presence foremost, but also the reality of being able to pull off the exhibition in the way that we wanted to.

AK:

Does that mean that you two are also furloughed? Naima, I know you have your very full-time job at LACMA, but Diana, you are freelance, correct?

DN:

Let's be transparent, because I do want to commend Prospect for the fairness of the way they handled things with us. They are going to pay us the full fee for our contract this year and prorate us for next year. The organization is trying to understand that we do this for a living, the artists do this for a living, our staff does it for a living. It's a labor of love, and we all go above and beyond our duties, but I just want to say that our executive director has always been transparent with us about money. I feel grateful for that because these jobs are super precarious and Prospect came through in a way that felt

ethical. And beyond that, I never had to worry about losing my job—because I don't have one. Naima is in a different situation.

NJK:

While I'm certainly not diminishing the privilege that I have with my position, whether you have a job or not, I think that Prospect honoring the agreement that they had made to pay us—despite the fact that we are pushing back the event—is a testament to the organization. Things have definitely slowed down a bit because we are no longer racing towards the finish line, but to give you an example, we had a phone call with our board chair this morning at 8am and we've agreed that we will probably take some time off this summer. It's not that we are always working, but in essence there is always an element of Prospect that we are thinking about or discussing. We didn't have to fight to be compensated for the year.

DN:

Right now, we're watching every museum in the US show their true colors when, one week into the crisis, they let go the lowest level, most insecure staff. Immediately. This was when we all thought we would be back at work in April or May, and now that moment feels far away, but those questions around payment are resurfacing as we talk more about equity and racism in the museum. We recognize that museums so often elide the ethics of payment and finances and job security under the guise of their missions. It's been great to see the tangible things that are coming out of this moment in terms of demands on museums. We are cognizant that we are in a more fortunate position because we are a small organization. But the carnage out there has been hard watch.

AK:

And it's not over yet. There is still a lot of hardship to come. Thinking more along the lines of the economic ramifications, I am wondering how your partners on the ground and the people in New Orleans who were waiting for the benefits that come along with Prospect have been affected. Has there been any fallout from the postponement? What have the conversations been like?

NJK:

Luckily, there hasn't been any fallout, but there was certainly disappointment, especially for the artists based in New Orleans because this is a big moment. I know one artist in particular was really looking forward to showing their work off to their friends and family. We know that Prospect is still happening, but in that moment, it just felt like 2021 was so far away. We know how fast time flies, but when you are working on a timeline that was originally seven months and is now going to be more than a year away, it's disappointing, but luckily, we didn't experience any blowback.

Diana was really sensitive about when to tell artists the news, how often to check in, and about sending follow-up emails. We've tried to be as understanding and as supportive as possible because we know that a lot of people were putting a lot of TLC into this.

In terms of the institutions, everything has been rearranged, rethought, canceled, etc. Before going dark we reached out to all of the institutions and asked if they were still game to even do this and if the spaces that we wanted would still be available. The majority said they were still able to do it because everyone has had to shift their calendars. I think everyone understands that with the pandemic we are just losing so much time that it would be virtually impossible for us to do the show right now.

TAUSIF NOOR:

The other thing that I wanted to bring in is that on the one hand, we are dealing with a global pandemic, and we are simultaneously seeing a lot of protests in support of Black Lives Matter, a movement that has been going on for years. The pandemic is exposing the inequities in our nation by virtue of how different communities are critically impacted, specifically Black, POC, and poor communities. So much of what seems to drive Prospect is its recognition of New Orleans as a center of Black cultural history in this country. What sense of responsibility do you have as curators of a triennial event in New Orleans and its impact on

local communities? I think it's different than, say, coming up against a historical collection of white, European art that you'd face at an institution like the Met. How do you approach issues of anti-Blackness and racism within the program and exhibition outside of just curatorial initiatives? How do we think about sustained anti-racist practices in our curatorial work?

DN:

One tangible thing that I would credit Naima with, and that I think is a hallmark of her practice, is thinking in a non-euphemistic way about community and thinking about who is coming to see this. I would say that a shortcoming of Prospect consistently has been its transparency and presence on the ground for different kinds of communities. I think that increasingly it has become a triennial for people from outside to travel to and come and see. Naima really directed us towards the idea that it has to be as much for the city as it is for the outside.

There are basic things that we should all be doing: Amplifying what is happening on the ground; being in dialogue with people who are capital "A" artists and people who are not; and recognizing that we're in a city where Black culture is the most important, but often takes shape outside of visual art. How do you look outside of your own discipline? How do you think about people who actually live in this location and people who might not have a relationship to the museum?

So, we had to ask: what are the steps that we can take practically in terms of the footprint of our exhibition, but also socially in terms of expanding our audience and having a better dialogue? We jokingly referred to our first year as a listening tour, and we shook a lot of hands and kissed a lot of babies and met a lot of people and listened. I think we learned so much and the triennial has been shaped so much in its concept and in its tangible realities because of that listening.

NJK:

Definitely, and I think that to that point, we both acknowledge that neither of us are from New Orleans, nor do we have family in New Orleans. We both live in L.A., and we both understood that we are guests. We can do as many trips as we want, but we are never going to be *from* there, but we forged relationships and tried to make ourselves accessible. For example, we would

tell people we were staying at a house and invite people around for pizza and beer. We tried to create opportunities where people could talk to us and reach us. At the same time, we are far from perfect. This is certainly not an opportunity for me to list everything that is wrong with Prospect, but just to say that being one of the only international exhibitions that happens in the city with this level of funding, there are high expectations of Prospect.

What we heard on this listening tour was that people wanted Prospect to generate jobs, to show more local artists, to amplify local curators, and so on. We had to navigate what our hopes and dreams were with what the organization can actually do in an authentic way. Part of doing this work is that there's who you are as a curator personally and then there's what the institution is ready and willing to commit to now and what they are ready to implement long-term. You don't want to go and do all of these things that are part of your own personal practice but won't last beyond Prospect.⁵ You just have to think about what the institution is willing and able to do long-term because I think the worst thing that you can do is start something and then end it abruptly.

DN:

And I want to say that I think we evaded your questions about anti-Blackness and racism because I think for us the more ethical quandary that we found ourselves in was the specialness of New Orleans, which is inextricably tied to those questions, and the sacredness of that city and also the ways it is consistently exploited. How do we ethically approach this? I would just echo how you framed that question. We are not up against a canon in this instance. The creative history of Prospect has always been the city of New Orleans. The triennial has increasingly become African diaspora-centered, and Global South focused, and so, some of that work, in terms of countering or expanding the canon, is woven into Prospect in a way that is perhaps more organic, and we have thought about this moment through that lens.

NJK:

I will, however, say that I think that it would be easy for us to simply say that we show Black artists, or we don't. I am not reducing Diana's comment to that, but I think that one of the things that an organization like Prospect can hide behind or use as a cover is that because every iteration has included artists of color, it's easy for us to claim that other institutions have work to do but that we're OK. Especially in our current moment where artists, curators, and activists are demanding more, it is not enough to just simply show Black artists and expect them to do all of the work. I think that we are in a place now with Prospect where we are going to have conversations where, given the fact that we are in New Orleans, we have to consider what more we can do and what other things come into play.

DN:

I think that the behind-the-scenes work is the hardest work. We are trying to figure out how Prospect.5 can also yield influence beyond its footprint as an exhibition with the organization.

TN:

There are a couple of things that you said that I wanted to pick up on. First, I think that so much of what curatorial practice has traditionally been is that the curator comes in with all of the knowledge, organizes things, and bequeaths an exhibit to the public, but one of the things that I really heard from both of your comments is that you are listening, and you are not coming in from a place of assuming that sort of knowledge. How can that be something that we apply across the board into curatorial practice and into institutional life?

The second point you mentioned—that you're not coming up against a collection or canon in a traditional museum—is also significant because I think you're still shifting the needle a little bit through your own individual curatorial practices and your collective work on Prospect.5, which might actually change elements of Prospect as a whole going forward. Every different iteration builds on the next curator. There is a precedent being set. And so, even if you are not creating a ton of new jobs, you are influencing the tenor of Prospect in New Orleans. There is a certain power in setting certain

standards or expectations. Something that Alex and I have been thinking about with this project is that institutions aren't just walls, buildings, and collections, they are the people. So often, curatorial history gets erased. How can we as people in this field continually shift that forward and respond to current issues and not go back to the same old shit?

DN:

I also think Naima and I are both grounded in institutional thinking. We've cut our teeth in very similar places and we've been subject to, influenced by, and are deeply aware of how much the institution can do. That's what shapes the curatorial voice. The idea that individuals and institutions are separate is false; they are married. Prospect is very loosely governed in terms of how the exhibition can come together so it was up to us to mandate what the codes are, what the ethics are, what the levels of transparency are, the communications. It has really been a dialogue with the people that constitute that organization. It allows for a laboratory to see what is successful and what should stay with Prospect through to the next iteration. There will be throughlines.

AK:

I'd love to hear more about how you are thinking about, rethinking, or not rethinking your theme. Prospect, as you were saying earlier, already has embedded in its DNA responses to the histories of trauma within the site of New Orleans-- from the reverberations of the transatlantic slave trade up through Hurricane Katrina to the urgency of the current protests against police brutality. What does this extra time allow? Are you now going back to artists with new projects, even though

you were probably already pretty far along with things?

NJK:

We haven't thought about changing our theme, because the idea of history as an ongoing and never-ending conversation and how history forms the present is still applicable, particularly now considering what the lasting legacies of COVID-19, Trump, the murders of George Floyd and others, and all of these events might be. What will the conversation look like a year from now?

In terms of our artists, we have been checking in with them regularly. A few of them have said that they would like a moment to think about their projects, but most of them said that they would like to stick with what they were doing originally.

DN:

We revisited everything with all of the artists once COVID-19 became more apparent as a serious pandemic and we were struck by the number of artists who said that these issues were already considered in their projects, and that they felt their projects were still timely and relevant. There are certain intricacies and ideas that will necessarily shift because the conversation has shifted. But a lot of artists have been attuned to this moment for a long time, their work was already here, already addressing these questions. The major question of the triennial, which is reconciling ourselves with history and with histories that are percolating to the surface, still stands. Nonetheless I think the more time we have living this out, which is something Naima has talked about, the stronger the exhibition will be. Not because we are necessarily on the other side of something, but because we are delving deeper into it. If you paid me money, I could not predict what will happen in a month; I am on the edge of my seat just waiting to see how things unfold.

NJK:

Again, Diana and I talk every day. Things are just happening so quickly between COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, its fallouts and the calls to action, and I feel like I am eating popcorn on the sidelines.

DN:

Are we going to emerge into a world with no police and no museums and no monuments and it's going to be a new day, or...

AK:

Or is Trump just going to be here forever!

DN:

We are standing on the precipice of so much possibility and I think that it is a strange time to try and mark. A triennial marks the zeitgeist, but on the other hand there is a certain timelessness to rupture. There is a certain way that artists are always predicting and pressing towards openness and a space of possibility that could diverge in many ways, but this was already at the heart of what they were doing, so our job is just to build a proper frame for it.

AK:

That is exactly why we are having this conversation. It feels important to get some of these thoughts down because things are just happening so quickly, and the ground is shifting so fast. But biennials and even triennials tend to be on these accelerated timelines, so it must also be nice to have a little bit more time and that extra space to breathe.

DN:

There's always a little bit of relief when someone pushes the deadline back. We finished the introduction for the catalogue the same week we announced the artist list; there is a line in it that says "As we write this the possibility of a global pandemic seems to be on the horizon." We won't begin finalizing and re-editing it until January of 2021, so the catalogue is a living document of this exact moment, it brackets an extraordinary year.

There was a certain cynicism that was built into the exhibition, to the title, to the spirit of New Orleans, to the moment, to these questions that yield no answers. Now, I feel open, and even hopeful, about this question of tomorrow. To see the conversation on the national level shift so dramatically has been heartening.

TN:

I'm admittedly always a bit cynical about what art does, or what art *can* do. I think perhaps some people have an expectation that art is going to change everything and set us free. I don't know that it can do that, but in terms of possibilities, I always

say that if I have someone come in and say, "I didn't know that art could be like that," or "I didn't know to think about this topic in this way," that's one indication of art's capacity to make an impact and that's one measure of success. I'm not wedded to romantic ideas about art, and I don't think that art is going to defund the police. Art about defunding the police is not going to defund the police. But, if someone can come in and understand why police brutality is such an incredible injustice, that might set gears in motion for that person, and maybe they will go and defund the police on their own. Whatever it is, I think we need to think about what it means for art to not just respond to this moment but to be of this moment. Perhaps the specificity of Prospect, of site and history, allows for these impacts to happen more organically.

DN:

Yes, and I will say two things. One thing that struck me that was in the paper the other day is that the California State University system is debating whether to mandate one ethnic studies class as a graduation requirement. They were saying that the point is to "be exposed to other worldviews," to get outside of yourself to analyze cultural politics, power, and identity formation in some other way. I think that is what art can provide—this shift in world view, even if it is very phenomenological.

But, on a more cynical and perhaps honest note, I don't know what the role of art is in this moment. I am excited about Prospect, and it is going to be timely and powerful, but I have lost an immense amount of faith in art and the artworld now and over the last many years. How do we extract art from the problematics of institutions and the problematics of capitalism? Art has been and is increasingly becoming a symptom of those things. I'm thinking about the tangible effects of social justice movements in society and not

thinking about art. I think there is an incredible visual culture coming out of this moment that we are going to be able to mark, but will art history, our institutions, our networks, capture this? I am not sure.

AK:

Following up on this question of what art can do, I would like to return to this question of what the organization can do. Although Prospect is not a traditional walled museum, you have expressed a desire to make changes. I keep returning to this idea of the schism between what we hope art or the institution is doing and what it can actually do. This is evident in the BLM statements that institutions are issuing, including ICA, that purport to live up to certain values, but that actually fall short in practice. What are your hopes for the organization and thoughts on what you can achieve or implement?

NJK:

We were talking on the phone this morning and asking, "What can we do? What can Prospect add to this conversation? What can we maintain?" All of these things are being discussed right now. My first reaction was, and my hope is, that we make very intentional choices about what we choose to shine a light on, such as choosing a Black-owned hotel as our partner hotel and spotlighting Black-owned restaurants. These are very small, but intentional choices that people might not even know about, but by making that hotel our partner and knowing that hundreds of people might potentially stay there is a very big statement. There are small things you can do, and considering our international platform, if we said to all of our colleagues around the world that these are the four hotels that we think you should stay in, or shining the light on interesting restaurants, we're making use of our platform.

There are also other intentional things we continue to do for the local economy, and we also are highlighting different satellite exhibitions that are on at the same time in the city as Prospect. That is something that Prospect is committed to. Although it will be a little smaller this time to keep it more

manageable, the idea is that we share the limelight a bit. For the long-term, we're figuring out ways to not just support young artists but young curators, such as hiring associate and assistant curators that are based in New Orleans that need a boost, which Prospect, because of its reputation, can give. Or it's thinking about doing exhibitions with these up-and-coming curators while Prospect is dormant. There are all kinds of different choices we can make, and I just hope that we can recognize that we do have this power and this platform and that we can tweak the conversation in subtle and different ways.

DN:

We come back to economics a lot and the issues that Naima brought up. We have to acknowledge that there are dollars tied to this platform and this is a major support mechanism that we can provide. I would echo that we try to be in dialogue with a lot of people who are on the ground in New Orleans, whether through the catalogue or program partners or advisors to create partnerships. I hope that is our lasting legacy within the organization: to affirm the centrality of New Orleans within this platform and to create conversations that emanate out from the city.
