Conversation with RITA GONZALEZ, LACMA

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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Alex Klein
What is your title and how long have you been working at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)?

Rita Gonzalez is the Terri and Michael Smooke Curator and Department Head in Contemporary Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Rita Gonzalez
I’m the Terri and Michael Smooke Curator and Department Head in Contemporary Art, and I’ve been at LACMA since 2004. From late 2004 to 2008, I was in more of a half-time capacity, because I was also connected to some other projects. I didn’t initially come in through the Contemporary Department—I began under a previous Director, Andrea Rich, and Deputy Director, Bruce Robertson. They were interested in reconfiguring the museum and moving away from a department-based structure to a research institute structure. This move toward transdisciplinarity and cross-departmental thinking was really coming out of academia—deconstructing the departmental factionalization and going more into this research mode.

Although I was supposed to come under the auspices of this newly formed research center on the Americas—that was also supposed to shift and expand “Americanists” within “American” art to think more hemispherically—that never came to pass. I was later adopted by the Contemporary Department. Ever since that time, there’s been an ongoing debate about reorganizing the departmental structure. It may be in the process of happening now mostly because we have a more collaborative and cross-departmental working environment. I think what has happened is that instead of being focused on categorization and nomenclature, collaboration has been taking place more in the realm of acquisitions, programs, and exhibitions.
The shifts are generational, and it’s been my generation and people who are slightly older and younger than me who have been trained academically. The factional thinking, or departmental thinking, and these fiefdoms that still control places are finally starting to shift.

AK
What context were you coming from before entering full-time into the curatorial space of LACMA?

RG
I came out of UCLA and I was in a couple of worlds there, which both had to do with transdisciplinarity. I was a PhD student in a program that was within the Department of Film, Television, and Media called Critical Studies. While this is a department of film historians and theorists it also had people who were branching off in different areas, like Peter Wollen and Chon Noriega, who was also curating in the visual arts and doing policy making and policy studies—he wore multiple hats. That was one world. And the other world was that of the ethnic studies research centers that had been established in the late 1960s and onward. I was also working for Chon at the Chicano Studies Research Center and doing publications, research, archival work and things that were a cross-over into my dissertation—although my dissertation was evolving thematically.

AK
And before that?

RG
I also had museum work before that, and I was working for Mike Kelley—I was trying to experience all sides.

AK
In some respects, you’re from the old guard of LACMA, but you’re also very much part of the new dispensation or recontextualization of LACMA. It’s interesting to see how you’ve gone through that institution under different directors and really different articulations of what LACMA is and how that campus is even laid out. What
The Los Angeles County Museum of Art was the fine arts offshoot of the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art, which encompassed everything from cultural history to sciences to fine arts and which now exists as the Natural History Museum at Exposition Park. LACMA broke off and established itself in a separate building in 1965, where it still currently stands, partially because of, as it always tends to be, real estate alignments. It became a part of Hancock Park, in the burgeoning "Museum Mile," as they call it now, on Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue, which is somewhat central, if you can say that there is a central point in Los Angeles.

LACMA really emerged in the mid-1960s, and I think from the very beginning there was attention around the role of the contemporary, and attention around the role of artists, particularly living artists, within it. There was really no platform at that point, because of the fallout of Norton Simon and the Pasadena Art Museum, and the fallout of the stakes of the contemporary—contemporary being what we now call modern. I think what the founders thought about, for the most part, was the tension over what the role of the living artists would be. And yet, from the very beginning, there was a contemporary art council.

AK
Yes, I was going to ask—was there always a Contemporary Department at LACMA? When did the Contemporary Department begin?

RG
The council, in my understanding, were the ones that were more actively engaged and actively responsive. That is the sense that I get, because there were programs preexisting the museum’s architectural life in 1965, going back into 1962 and 1963. The council pre-existed the building itself, and there were exhibitions of different stripes, including this show that they did of Seymour Rosen’s photographs of Watts Towers. Early on, the council sponsored the Young Talent Award or the New Talent Award and that was a way to support artists. It was basically a prize, to give artists a lump sum of money, which I think was about $300 at the time in 1964. In return, the artists would give them a work of art. At the time, the prize money would cover an artist’s studio for year!
AK
Is that where your contemporary collection originated?

RG
Yes, that’s kind of where it started.

AK
That’s interesting.

RG
In terms of the stakes of the curatorial ranks, it really wasn’t until Maurice Tuchman arrived and established a name, an agenda, and a really experimental way of thinking about projects. Art and Technology, for instance, was a really defining program for the museum for a number of years, from 1967 through 1971.

AK
LACMA has this amazing DNA. Fast forwarding to the present, I’m curious about its shifting role within the contemporary community within Los Angeles. There’s always been a thriving artist community that’s worked parallel to the industry of Hollywood, which has been getting more attention from blue chip galleries and the mega-surveys of LA art that have been happening for the past 15 years or so. But watching LACMA follow that path of the larger cultural ecology of Los Angeles, I’m wondering, what the institution’s function is in the contemporary art community?

RG
I think it’s hard to say what the perception of LACMA was in the 1970s and 1980s, although there were a number of these exhibitions that we could, in a way, liken to these contemporary survey manifestations, such as *Made in L.A.* at the Hammer Museum, and prior to that, the California
Biennial. There was one that was called *Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties* (1981), where there were attempts to represent working artists and to provide a platform for that particular history. With the burgeoning role of the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (MOCA LA) in the 1980s, the art scene really began to be driven by artists from Los Angeles. Prior to that, there was Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, or LACE, and Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, or LAICA, and other alternative spaces. These were spaces that were quicker to respond, and more deeply embedded within dialogues that were driven more by artists, so there was that landscape of support. That was a different time then, too—you can see this with the statements that are in Ree Morton’s show you have on view at ICA Philadelphia. The support of individual artists by the National Endowment of the Arts was key to so many artists across the country. This was a time when there were more of platforms of support, so there wasn’t a need to be so connected to a commercial apparatus. One could get by.

AK
Los Angeles was cheaper then, too.

RG
Right. I think the stakes of institutional support have been modified over the years.

AK
That’s interesting.

RG
And then, of course, with the consistent role of art schools—you could go back to Chouinard, and you could go back to the early 20th century, but definitely from the late 1960s onward, the consistent support structure that the art schools offered loosened the requirement of an artist to have the “necessary” support of LACMA.

AK
I wanted to circle back around to the “County” in the Los Angeles County Museum’s name, and how that affects everything from funding to audience to responsibility.
I think there is a strong sense of accountability that comes with that name. Fortunately, over the years that hasn't translated into just a kind of populist response, but to me it seems more multidimensional in its responsiveness. Some of that responds to certain calls: over the years, there have been calls to exhibit more work by African American artists, Chicano and Latino artists, and feminist protests against Art and Technology. I mentioned the predominance of white male artists in Maurice Tuchman's Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties (1981), which motivated many women artists to come out in protest.

The responsiveness of the museum is, I think in part, because of a sense that it is a county institution. In terms of its funding, only 30% of its funding comes from the county and everything else is fundraised. But it's really about the education department, the outreach, and the complexity of that outreach, where we are thinking about audience fundamentally. It's definitely a departure, because there are colleagues in our field for whom it's really not about numbers. You hear a lot of curators say that if an exhibition they've worked on only touches four people, they feel like they've done their job. I personally do not feel that. I do not feel like I've done my job if only four people have come in to see the exhibition. Because we have a broader platform, and we have more resources, and we have more captivity, and we have more staff, we have a responsibility to get a broad audience and as many people as possible that have never been to a museum.

That's great.

I know that for me, LACMA was my first museum, and it was the museum that I grew up going to. It was the museum that introduced me to the avant-garde, and it was the museum that introduced me to an international vocabulary of its time, so Anselm Kiefer, for example. But it was still that space of introduction that I could access because I was taken there on a field trip, or it was the one time a year that my family would go to the County Museum.

And I know that's the case for thousands of students that have come through. That personal connection also must impact the outward-facing content that you produce. How many people work at LACMA? Do you have a sense
of how big the staff is at this point?

RG

It’s around 400.

AK

Yes—it was around 400 when I was there, and I just assumed that it had grown since then.

RG

Yes, including all the facilities since then. It’s hard to say because there’s so many people coming in and out and on the maintenance of campus.

AK

How many people work in the Contemporary Department?

RG

Two curators and two curatorial assistants. We have an extremely small department at this point in time.

AK

I ask that question just to get a visualization of scale and manpower. Is 2008 when you officially transferred into the Contemporary Department?

RG

Yes. I think staff-wise in photography and other curatorial departments, it’s been a generational shift, and as we’ve entered into this speculative phase of what will be a 21st-century campus, there’s been attrition and not wanting to hire until that happens.

AK

I’ll be excited to hear where you go with that campus. What year did your director start?
Michael Govan has been here 11 years. I think he started the year you did.

AK
I think he started right before I began at LACMA, because he was our keynote speaker at my MFA graduation ceremony. In any case, I think it’s important to highlight that you’ve been through these big institutional and generational shifts with different directors, and also department-heads.

TAUSIF NOOR
Something that is interesting within encyclopedic institutions versus say, the ICA Philadelphia, is that it’s possible within our building to see all the exhibitions at once—whereas I’ve lived in Philadelphia for a year and I haven’t seen all of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

RG
It’s like going to the Met—you see about a sixth of it in a visit.

TN
Right, so with encyclopedic, collections-based institutions, there are people who come to see a specific work or a specific artist. With the contemporary, how do you think of audiences—who might come specifically to see an ancient work—how do they get exposed to the contemporary, if not by accident?
It’s ingrained into the cross-departmental thinking about the collection. I think at this point—it’s been however many years after institutional critique—it’s become so ingrained. That’s the only word—built in, baked in—across curatorial and education and now those being much more interconnected and interdependent.

AK
Is that a shift that has happened during your time at LACMA or did it precede you?

RG
I think it’s been ongoing. That has to do with retention in the education field. This is an area that is resource-rich in terms of funding streams for particular projects. These things are project-funded by two or three endowments, so you see more people cycling in and out and making these other lateral moves into other departments, or other museums, or other art spaces. It’s hard to keep that momentum going in that field. It tends to be younger people, more women, more people of color, and I think unfortunately, it’s underfunded. Those salaries are really underfunded, as much as our curatorial salaries are criminally underfunded as well. So, it’s a matter of holding that and having that sustainability. Nevertheless, it’s had a real impact on people’s presentations of the collection and programming and the campus itself.

When Michael Govan arrived, and he was coming out of his experience at the Dia Foundation, he was very interested in the visitor experience. We say when you cross the sidewalk—or really when you exit the parking lot from Wilshire Boulevard, because more people in Los Angeles drive, you immediately see works, and you’re engaging with contemporary works of art at a very large scale.

AK
The Chris Burden installation has become an icon.

RG
And the Michael Heizer.

AK
In L.A. it’s hard to remember that it wasn’t always there.
There used to be a street there, right?

AK
Yes, the campus was then transformed into a gathering space.

RG
Exactly, and now there’s a square or a gathering space. Of course, this is all happening over the last 20 years, in which there’s been a reconsideration of the role of the museum—that the role of the museum is kind of a multiplex gathering for other social interactions and of course educational interactions as well.

AK
Right.

RG
Because if people are going to come for an entire day, they want that narrative to unfold in different ways, during which they might go to a shop, they might have a coffee, and then spend time in the galleries. So, it’s that reorganization and sensory activation of different parts of the campus and the architecture. I think architecture was becoming the star for so many years—you know, “build and they will come”—and I think that’s still a little bit of the mentality and the transformation of LACMA going forward with Peter Zumthor. Peter Zumthor is more poetic in his approach and in expanding the public space, and expanding the parkland, with the possibility that people could actually use and have an engagement with the building itself and the collection.

AK
Can you talk a little bit about what those plans are?

RG
I think this goes back to the 1990s when there was talk of new construction, and at that time, Rem Koolhaas was in the running for the design. He had devised a lateral way of thinking and reshaping the encyclopedic collection. It was going to be much more rhizomatic and much less of “Enter through Greece” and then “Exit through Contemporary and to the gift shop.” That didn’t come to pass, and the design was much more concerned with intersecting pavilions with an overhanging construct. Zumthor is also thinking laterally in terms of the cellular offshoots.
AK
Have the curators been consulted by the architects?

RG
Yes, and it’s been an extremely long process. I think Michael Govan had already been thinking about Peter Zumthor when he arrived. So, it’s really been more than a decade.

AK
The conditions for art and exhibition-making are really different now than they were 50 years ago. It’s fascinating to think how the curators inform the actual architecture that you get to work in.

RG
I think he’s been responsive to us and he’s spent so much time in Los Angeles, and every detail has been such a holistic understanding of the geography, light, and movement.

AK
Because we’re on the topic of architecture, maybe it’s a good moment to also talk about what the plans for exhibition-making and your work during this lockdown moment, while half of the campus is being renovated for several years. How does that change your thinking about things like exhibition-making, and acquisitions, or maybe satellite projects?

RG
It’s been really great because there’s been a chance to take a deep dive into the collection. We never really had a dedicated space to consistently present the collection, which is a curse and a blessing. It’s a curse that with collecting museums all over the world, a vast majority of what you take care of is in deep storage and not on display. On the other hand, it’s been an opportunity to rethink, instead of rotations, wholesale exhibitions.

AK
Right.
We can construct a narrative out of what we’ve been collecting. So, we’ve done that in different episodes. I did one called *Lost Line: Contemporary Art From the Collection* (2012) and I couldn’t believe that we were still maintaining these clenched hands on our different departmental holdings and that certain works had never been in conversation with each other. To finally put some things together in dialogue—the first gallery in *Lost Line* had Gabriel Orozco, Robert Smithson, and Amalia Pica, for instance—just shows how different artists had been formally segmented only because they resided in a certain departmental collection, and therefore had only been shown in the wings of Latin American Art or Korean Art or what have you. That was an opportunity to work across departments. Going forward, we’re going to have less space and there’s going to be more of an opportunity to tour the collection. When you do that, you dive into this history of donors, the histories of these support councils, and the history of collecting itself.

AK
Are there holes in the collection that you’re specifically focused on that you feel an urgent need to try and fill?

RG
It’s really ridiculous what we did not collect in the 1960s and 1970s. There are different strands where you look into the history as a non-collecting institution. I would imagine the curators were looking to places like ICA Philadelphia and seeing the energy and programmatic tendencies that were going on at the time in the late 1960s and 1970s, and having artists come and do something, but then there was no thought at the time. This isn’t just LACMA’s problem, but I think it’s a systemic problem: You would invite James Lee Byars, Guy de Cointet, or Michael Asher to come and do a project, but you wouldn’t buy any works. It wouldn’t occur to you that you could collect something like that because there wasn’t a framework for collecting conceptual art at the moment.

AK
Right, even the contemporary market as it is, is really a product of the 1980s.

RG
Right, no performance, or video, or dance, or music. LACMA has New Music Mondays and film too. So, many of these histories have been about examining
these gaps and then trying to bring them back. With Art and Technology, we’ve had these capsule shows that have brought back the archival research and also the pieces, but even with Art and Technology, the institution was not collecting the pieces at the time, or pieces by Rauschenberg, for instance.

AK
You have this opportunity to flesh out the collection, to make it more representative of the people that live in Los Angeles and to go back to the histories and figures that might have been overlooked. How do you understand the parameters of the collection and determine what makes sense for LACMA?

RG
We have no acquisition endowment, so it’s really difficult.

AK
How do acquisitions work?

RG
If we did have some financial security then I think we could be more—not to say that we can’t be strategic currently—but then we could have a strategy and then have a system to follow through with that strategy. We do have long term desires to fill certain gaps, but then we have to look for any opportunity to fill those. You know, in Los Angeles it’s like the pothole issue; we’re constantly trying to fill so much.

AK
There are so many artists, too because you’re balancing the history of the collection and then balancing all the new work that’s being made, because you don’t want to miss out on all the things that are right in front of you. And I know you’re really good at going deep into studios and going around town. What is the connection between the history
of LACMA and its responsibility to the artists working now? For instance, you provide support to working artists by bringing groups through to artist studios and bringing younger voices to the collection alongside this impressive historical collecting.

RG
I think that’s where the encyclopedic nature of the institution has started to become really helpful, because some of my colleagues in other departments have been developing interest in modern and contemporary—although it might not be their proclaimed expertise. That openness has meant that we’re able to say, that if we don’t have the capacity to collect a work by this contemporary Chinese artist, then maybe that department does, and they have connections to donors that would be able to give. That really has been unfolding in a more organic way.

AK
So, you’ll collaborate with other departments?

RG
Either through collaboration or just saying here’s an opportunity.

AK
There must be a lot of things that are nebulous about what department they should be in.

RG
Yes, and then at that point, we’re happy to bring that in formally. What’s more important is that we’re having a dialogue about how these objects should be contextualized, so that it’s not always that these objects should be relegated to the Chinese Hall, or the Egyptian Hall, or something similar, so that it has a possibility of exchange and in dialogue with historic and contemporary work. I think that’s really opened up and it’s taken a long time.

TN
You spoke about having a responsibility to both artists and the L.A. County community. How
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Do you take that into account in terms of language, and making labels or other didactics accessible to people who speak languages other than English?

**RG**

We’ve been really late on that frontier. For years, I think the conversation has been about, “Well if it’s within the presentation of certain works from the Americas, then do you provide these labels?” When we’ve been doing a major Latin American exhibition, there’s been more of a push, as opposed to having bilingual Spanish all the time. We should have, being in Los Angeles and being so near to Koreatown, 170 languages.

**AK**

Aren’t there more languages spoken in LA than any other city? It’s so polyglot that it’s difficult, but I think we really lack institution-wide policy on that.

**RG**

It’s really been show by show that it’s happened. And there were interesting conversations, going back to 2008, when I worked on an exhibition of Chicano art and evaluating a younger generation that had come of age being born in the 1970s and the height of the Civil Rights Movement, there was Spanish, there was English, there was Spanglish. What do you do when you have this kind of hybrid identity?

I’m noticing with a younger wave of Latinx artists, especially in Los Angeles, possibilities have opened up where you have first generation Mexican, or Honduran artists, whose first language was Spanish, whereas my generation were predominant English speakers, but also had Spanish in the house. That’s been interesting too, with their demands for recognition, for us not to think of Chicano-centrism but a much more complex portrayal of the lives of immigrants in Southern California. I think that language and categories are always evolving, and it’s about trying to keep up with change, but it’s also about developing system-wide ways of addressing language.

**TN**

Has the rise of private art foundations in Los Angeles impacted the way LACMA, with its focus on public accessibility
and responsibility to the county, thinks about its mission or role?

RG
I don’t know if I can say that this has been impacted. It’s just that it seems to be a sign of its time, although we can say that most museums can trace themselves to one family. The philanthropic work of a couple of families, from robber barons to industrial types to people in global finance and commerce, has been a through-line in museums, especially in the United States. In talking about the private museums, they’re feeling compelled to conform to the models of museum practice. They feel compelled because they don’t want to be written off as a vanity museum. They feel compelled to spend more money on public programming or to bring someone. In the case of The Broad, they have this incredibly open and very queer-driven performance series, occasionally curated by performance artist Nao Bustamante and feminist theorist Jennifer Doyle, and I feel like they feel like they will allow for that radicality and that platform because it offsets the over-emphasis on showing blue-chip artists or just your collection. So, I feel like it’s the opposite. They feel like they need to conform to museum standards and they also need to show that they have an educational and audience-driven impetus.

TN
Right, that their process is a process of institutionalizing, in a way.

RG
Yes.

AK
It’s like Hauser & Wirth having an education department or research wing.

RG
I feel like it takes the pressure off of me, you know. If someone wants to go see an entire room of great Warhols or Jasper Johns, go across the city, because we’re not going to be able to afford it.

AK
That leads perfectly back to the question of the context of the city and the ecology, because Los
Angeles, especially now, is rich with contemporary art in spaces from people’s garages to LACMA. There are different scales and economies, so with that in mind, what is the role of LACMA’s Contemporary department within the broader context of Los Angeles and places like MOCA and ICA LA?

RG

It’s been very interesting for me to come into these Pacific Standard Time initiatives because that shows the integrative, collaborative, and very research-heavy capacity that LACMA has, and those are things that we continue to do. We work at a slower pace, but it’s with the possibility of something unfolding through research, and then being able to do a publication and exhibition. I’ve become even more mindful of our resources and the responsibility that we have to recognize and support institutions across the landscape. It’s been really incredible for me to see and to learn about the histories of those spaces, and you learn how these things are interconnected within this regional history. They’re really contingent. They take on different responsibilities too as they age, like graphics. That history takes on different responsibilities at LACE or LAXART—that’s a relatively new one—but it takes on different responsibilities that one institution does XYZ consistently, because it really evolves. You can look to the early history of LACE, which I spent a lot of time doing with C. Ondine Chavoya when we did the Asco retrospective in 2011, and realized that early on, it has a really strong connection to a number of Chicano and Latino artists and there was a real engagement with contemporary Latin American visual art and then reprogrammed itself and became more performance, dance, and video-driven. So, you realize that these institutions are really driven by curatorial thought and shifting perspectives. Those groups of artists then find another place and they generate their ideas in a different form and in a different institution. That helped tell that story in the first Pacific Standard Time, and I think it was equally in tune with Pacific Standard Time: LAILA, where we could uncover a lot of the links across the Americas.

AK

It sounds as though—at least from your perspective—PST has built a collegiality in the city, or a relationality, so that people
aren't just burying down into their individual fiefdoms, but they become proximate to each other.

You brought up the idea of institutions being shaped by the curatorial visions that are in them, and I'd love to hear your perspective, because you've done some landmark shows over the years. The way that curators are able to propose exhibitions in encyclopedic institutions is very different than in a place like the ICA, a kunsthalle, where we're rapid-firing all the time. There are fewer channels that we have to go through to get our shows on the calendar. How do you get exhibitions on the calendar, and how does your perspective on your core curatorial focus work in the institution?

RG
The process is definitely tough in an encyclopedic museum because there's not enough space, and there's a lot of forces at work.

AK
Right. How many departments are there at LACMA?

RG
I would say about 16 but as I mentioned before, some are being folded into larger contructs, and we are all moving in the direction of curating in relation to each other’s holdings.

AK
There are a lot of different curatorial perspectives that are trying to get real estate, and then there’s also a director with a curatorial perspective.
Yes, and Michael Govan is also a curator. There’s also the exchange of traveling exhibitions that we bring in. We actually generate a lot of exhibitions and tour a lot of exhibitions, so we’re not always taking touring exhibitions, although there’s a healthy strand coming through. It’s hard to say—I think you have to evaluate LACMA within the regional landscape. We have the capacity to take certain shows, and they tend to be shows that are created by institutions of the same size, budget-wise, for the larger-scale shows. I wish we could be more flexible for the smaller-scale shows. That’s what we lack. I think that’s something that Michael Govan did bring in. He wanted to focus on the types of exhibitions that we could execute and that we could absorb. So, it all tends to be on a large-scale, with large-scale survey shows.

With that in mind, when we’re generating ideas for exhibitions, you have to think about the scale of the museum and think about the interplay within the institution and the institutional history. That is the first thing that goes into consideration when developing ideas for exhibitions. Then going forward—I’ve talked to other curators about this, and I think Lynne Cooke has written about this too—I think about how the thematic show or group exhibition has become an endangered species. We’ve only been able to do them, me or Christine Y. Kim, who is the Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, or even when Franklin Sirmans was at LACMA, by reconfiguring or using our collection in some way, and then we’re given flexibility and creativity. Otherwise, if the museum is going to support you to do some large-scale presentation, in terms of the budget and their eagerness to see that travel, it has to be some solid mid-career research or retrospective, or some kind of geographic presentation that they know they’re going to be able to successfully tour. That becomes extremely challenging because it really limits the parameters and limits the experimentation with the presentation and exhibition format.

With that said, you have been able to do some pretty amazing and experimental shows.

Yes, with the collection.

I’m thinking also of your show for *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, A Universal History of Infamy.*
Right, but that’s because that’s within the capacity of a major sponsor—the fiscal sponsor, the Getty.

AK
Right, but then on the flip-side, organizing a proper survey of Asco in the Los Angeles County Museum means something different than say, ICA doing the show. It projects to the world a kind of gravitas—not that the work that we do here doesn’t have historical ramifications—but it does send some other kind of signification in terms of canon-building.

TN
Not just to the world, but also to the community. We talk about how there are different publics, but the range of LACMA’s different publics is pretty incredible. I’ve only been to Los Angeles once, but it was mind-blowing how many micro- and macro- communities there are in the city.

RG
Right, because then you turn the corner and it’s Filipinotown and then you turn the corner and its Little Bangladesh. When I’m driving home, I drive through Little Bangladesh and turn the corner into Koreatown and turn the corner into Echo Park, which was for many years a Latinx population.

TN
There’s so many layers to considering LACMA’s responsibility to its communities and to Los Angeles as a city. I was really heartened by thinking about how PST, LACMA, MoCA,
and ICA LA have decentered the New York/East Coast-centric art world. Now that there are more centers than peripheries, what does that mean in terms of exhibition-making? P

That leads me to a question that we’ve often asked, especially smaller-scale institutions: Who do you think of as your community and is that the same thing as your audience?

There are just so many. It’s oftentimes people who don’t find themselves in museums all the time, and that’s the majority of people who happen to be here.

Because you’re also a tourist destination?

Yes, but because of the surveys that we’ve done, we have less of a tourist visitorship than the Los Angeles base. But our audience actually is a lot of people who’ve been meaning to go for years, and they’ve never gone until someone gets them there. This applies to students, of course. We have a program called NextGenLA, where we offer free membership for kids and teens under 17 who live in L.A. County. They can visit the museum for free anytime and bring a guest as well. That gets a lot of people in. And that’s not to say that artists don’t go there, because I think that increasingly artists are very supportive of the museum. That’s also not to suggest that there aren’t art-informed people, but I think a lot of the time it’s just people who out of curiosity want to see what the space and museum is like.
AK
That must affect your voice then, within the institution, and how things are communicated.

RG
Yes. I don’t think people come with certain expectations, whereas if I were going to the Met or the Louvre for the first time in my life, I would just have these ideas in my mind. I would have these sort of sign-posts: “I have to see this, I have to see the Delacroix.” There’s not a similar imaginary around the County Museum, so I think people just encounter things as they come, which to me, gives that possibility to not have a script. It allows us to not have to be absorbed with the canonical because we’re not drowning in masterpieces, although we have many outstanding works in the collection. It doesn’t have to be so sell-out with your icons; it really is more of these free-floating spaces of encounter from very focused exhibitions into the collection, to the types of exhibitions where we’re able to bring in. I was so happy that we were able to bring in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, which was a very unorthodox show for the National Gallery of Art to have generated.

AK
It was great for it to be in a contemporary department as opposed to the American Art department.

RG
Exactly. Which is not to discredit the very exploratory work that Ilene Fort has done over the years being in American Art and really pushing the boundaries in her field, where she was actually trained to bring a lot of this work into the collection and bring attention to artists like William Edmundson or Janet Sobel.

AK
It brings up that question of what the “contemporary” is and how what you do might be relevant to the moment that we’re in. And how that can transcend historical parameters and codifications of what we think of as the contemporary. Having been at LACMA for as long as
you’ve been, you probably know how to navigate the institution really well, but what are some of your biggest frustrations? In our day-to-day curatorial work, in the institutions that we all work in, there are different types of roadblocks and other kinds of possibilities. You have resources at your fingertips that are pretty great.

RG

What’s been concerning me as of late is—and this seems to be across the board with independent publishing—that for so many years, exhibitions have always come firmly attached with the promise of a publication, where writing is a site for the reflection of the labor, of the research process, of the other possibilities that the exhibition might not have been able to take. I’m just finding of late that the publication is really under fire. In the past, there were certain things that were built into institutional budgets where development would sponsor in a way by buying a certain amount. Different departments, like Exhibitions, would allocate parts of their have budget to the publication so that across the board, there was buy-in. And as operating budgets have grown in terms of staffing and insurance, this is something that’s being cut and cut and cut. Foundations are also deciding that they would rather spend the money on things that have more direct impact, or civic impact—as they should. But then, that means that say, the Rockefellers aren’t going to support or MacArthur Foundation is not going to support as they would in the past, when they had the possibility of a huge publication. That’s been concerning to me because that seems to be becoming part of this new norm, or increasingly accepted. There’s a concern like, “What are you going to do when the book store won’t carry this, or they’ll only carry a certain number, and they don’t want to have boxes or they don’t have the storage?” I feel like that’s being chipped away, and it’s not just at LACMA, but at other institutions as well.

TN

Which is alarming when you consider how to think about exhibition histories once the exhibition comes down. We have the internet, but it feels more ephemeral.
I know, it’s so ephemeral.

And also, it takes a different form. One of the things I think about and I always ask when I look at exhibitions is, “Would this be better as a book?” It’s not just an archival practice, but the form of a book or an exhibition catalogue offers a different way of thinking through the work.

At LACMA, do you charge admission?

We do. It’s free for Los Angeles residents after 3PM. There’s a lot of opportunities to get in and have free admission. Children and teens under 17 who live in L.A. County can bring their parents. L.A. County residents receive free admission from 3PM–5PM every day; 3PM–8PM on Fridays; and every 2nd Tuesday of every month. Federal holidays are sponsored by Target.

It’s so complicated! We were talking earlier about missed opportunities and previous exhibition histories. Is that part of your mission that, for example, when you did the Agnès Varda show, will you acquire the work for an institution?

Yes.
When you work with artists, do you pay them? What are the conversations about compensation within your institution?

It’s commissioning. If it’s commissioning a new project, we’ll pay an honorarium and then for production. In this last exhibition that we did during Pacific Standard Time: LAILA, it was just figuring out the entire budget and then within that, trying to be evenhanded within the distribution of support because we didn’t have artists who had major gallery backing or anything like that in our exhibition. So, we were very equal, although we worked with NuMu, which is run by two artists from Guatemala and we were able to do our first Kickstarter in addition to what we were able to give. But if we’re commissioning something, we definitely give an artist’s fee and the production.

That’s great.

If it’s just a monographic survey, then typically no.

Because you’re the County Museum, are you technically all city employees?

No.

Are you your own entity?

No, we used to be. It was a managerial entity.

What about maternity leave? Is that determined by the city?
It’s determined by the state. There are a few county employees still, but I think in the early 1990s it was changed over to the Museum Associates, which is its own entity.

AK
So, there was a shift at some point from the city to its own entity.

RG
Like statewide, and it’s all the same for family leave.

AK
That question of infrastructure is interesting—when did it shift from city to its own entity?

RG
I’m not sure if I can give a definitive answer. It’s a county museum, but I think the oversight just became more efficient under this Museum Associates entity. It could be tied to ongoing corporatization of many museums in late 1980s/early 1990s, but I don’t feel knowledgeable enough to speculate.

AK
Where do you see the Contemporary Department going at LACMA, and what are your hopes for the department? What are you most excited about?

RG
I just think that there’s a much more contingent way of working at the museum: that you have to be interconnected to the Director, to the Exhibitions Department, and then your colleagues in other departments. I have contemporary experts in Photography and Prints and Drawings, and we’re working alongside each other.

Going forward, it’s that possibility of trying to maintain an alignment, because if we join our resources, our research capacity, and our capacity to travel and see and engage with artists and art historians, it will enhance the whole presentation of the contemporary art at LACMA. I don’t think of it as a dominion or domain, and I don’t think of it as sequestered. I think of it as needing to be supported by so many other colleagues and resources.
Within Southern California, going back to PST, I need to recognize and understand what’s going on in the landscape, and to think, “If I were to organize this exhibition, is LACMA the right institutional presentation or site for it?” It becomes much more interdependent. That’s what I see. Revising the institutional history is definitely a huge thing going forward, and really trying to show that within the museum, although it was never sanctified or solidified, there was an engagement with artists of color, women artists, queer artists, and to finally recognize, acknowledge, and to collect and preserve that work.