

Conversation with LIGHT INDUSTRY

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
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07.10.19

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LIGHT INDUSTRY

Light Industry is a venue for film and electronic art in Brooklyn, New York, developed and overseen by Thomas Beard and Ed Halter.

With Thomas Beard, Ed Halter, Alex Klein, and Tausif Noor

THOMAS BEARD

Light Industry is a very modest enterprise. It's just the two of us plus some volunteers helping with taking tickets and selling beer.

ED HALTER

And our board.

TB

Yes, and our board. But on a day-to-day level, it's just me and Ed.

ALEX KLEIN

What year did Light Industry start?

EH

In 2008. Our first show was in March 2008, so this year is our tenth anniversary. From the beginning, Thomas and I ran it together. We began with just the idea of wanting to do screenings. I don't think we had settled on the idea of a concrete space, at first.

TB

The impulse for Light Industry arose because a lot of the smaller cinemas — like the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema, which ran from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and Ocularis, which had a similar trajectory — those kinds of spaces had wound down. It felt like there was a real need for a new venue of that kind in New York. Around that time, Orchard, the artist-run gallery that operated for three years on the Lower East Side, had an exhibition called *On the Collective for Living Cinema*, and Ed wrote about it and interviewed a lot of people who were involved with the Collective.

EH

That got us talking about what something like the Collective for Living Cinema would be today. This led us to the idea that we would do a series that would serve as a crossroads between the disparate communities of the moving image, so to speak, that then existed in New York. What's specific about New York versus a lot of the other cities—if not all other cities—is that there are a lot of people here who go to see challenging cinema, obscure cinema, unusual cinema, in a way that doesn't exist elsewhere.

However, we saw that the communities who were interested in cinema were often very fragmented. You had an art world that was interested in certain kinds of work. You had people who were devoted to experimental cinema. You had documentary filmmakers. You had academics. In our experience, these worlds didn't intersect, socially or conceptually, as much as they should. We thought Light Industry could work to fill in those gaps and link those communities.

TB

By having all of these different kinds of work sharing space in the same calendar.

EH

Exactly. And in a way that we weren't seeing happening otherwise. So, that was the initial idea. And then our first space came to us totally by chance. We actually came up with the name Light Industry before the space arrived.

AK

That was my next question.

EH

As it turned out, the space was in a place called Industry City, which is another coincidence.

TB

Home to the literal "light industry."

EH

I don't know if you went to our space back then, but Industry City is this gigantic complex. At one point, it was one of the most important industrial ports in the world. Over time it had become depopulated, but was still running. There was some small percentage that was still being used by manufacturing. There was, for example, a cardboard box factory operating downstairs from us.

TB

But if you went there during the day, it still seemed very active. There were trucks coming in and out every day. You'd get a whiff of the Virginia Dare factory, which produced flavors for Snapple. But at night, by 7:00 p.m. let's say, all of those businesses were shut down. There was basically no other reason to be there if you didn't work in one of those factories. So, when people would come to the first Light Industry space, there were these huge buildings with flood lights illuminating the cobblestone streets. People would walk long blocks from the subway with nothing else in sight, except for those huge buildings.

EH

Or the occasional dust devil going down the street.

TB

Also adult video stores, which lined the block.

EH

It looked like something from a Béla Tarr film.

TB

It felt like you were on a film set. You would snake your way up the stairwell of one of those buildings, and there would be a little hand-drawn sign, "Light Industry This Way," with an arrow. And then you open the door and there would be, like, 100 people there to see Annette Michelson introduce a Pudovkin film. There was something very natural about that first set-up. Though, one other thing, to backpedal a bit, which we usually don't talk about: We knew that we wanted to start something, and we could feel, acutely, that there was this gap in film exhibition in New York at the time, and one of our first ideas was that this new venue would be a collectively run enterprise. Maybe we would get a dozen people together, and each person would oversee a month of programming. So, I would do the February screenings; Ed would do the March screenings; someone else would do April, and so on. But nothing ever really came of that idea, thank God. We're socialists; we're all about that kind of collective endeavor. But in the case of Light Industry, there was something ideal about it being two people, and two people who know each other well enough to speak with great candor to one another about the program and the future of the organization.

EH

The first couple of years we operated out of that space, it was free. It was donated by the people who operated Industry City. We subsisted off of ticket sales completely, actually.

AK

I was going to ask how you funded those initial days of the program.

EH

The other thing we often talk about is how we partly organized Light Industry in reaction to both of us working in film festivals beforehand. I did the New York Underground Film Festival, Thomas had been working at CinemaTexas in Austin. That's how we met, through this small DIY film festival circuit that no longer exists. And while we loved those events, and poured our hearts into making them happen, there were a lot of limitations to them that really bothered us. One thing was how we were unable to pay artists because of the economics of doing a sprawling event like that. And the fact that you work all year round, and then it all comes down to one or two weeks.

TB

Which you aren't really able to fully appreciate, because you're putting out fires every moment while everyone else is just going to the movies.

EH

And packing all of those films into those two weeks entails inevitable technical disasters. You can't really give the proper attention to every film and every artist. The benefits, obviously, are that all of these people come to one place at one time, and you can have a meeting place that way.

TB

There's a catalytic aspect to film festivals.

EH

That's an important aspect of festivals, and we love that. But we had been frustrated with those other things, especially the idea that people were not being compensated for their work. That really bothered us. So, we decided that when we started Light Industry, from the beginning, and in its very initial DNA, we would always pay people who were presented.

TB

I mean, modestly.

AK

Communicating that you value people's time.

EH

Right. And then I just think we noticed, from running festivals, that what happens with budgets is once the budget is up and going, things are so chaotic and unpredictable that you can't go back and re-budget, and shortfalls seemed to be the rule. I remember one time at New York Underground, we tried to pay everybody. We did the math and everything. I think everyone got something like \$25, which is so absurd. It was an attempt at least. But people actually liked it and appreciated the money.

TB

It should be mentioned, too, that with film festivals, it's the custom of the country that there is typically no screening fee, which is horrible, but it's become cemented because people think "Oh, that's just how it's done." I think part of the logic behind it is that, let's say, if Todd Haynes has a new film, and it's at the New York Film Festival, they're probably not paying the distributor any money for that screening. But then, there's all kinds of publicity for the film as a result of the festival screening. It starts a conversation about the movie that then can translate into revenue when the film has a release. That's the general thinking behind why a festival wouldn't pay someone to screen a film.

EH

And that may have made more sense when there were fewer festivals and fewer opportunities to see things.

AK

But it's the same logic museums use to not pay artists, because you're getting cultural capital out of the exhibition and then maybe your work is worth more.

TB

Well, in an analogous way, if there's a Laura Owens show at the Whitney, that probably will translate into higher prices for the work. However, if there's an Yvonne Rainer show at Raven Row, she's not making things that a rich person can hang over their couch. That sort of exposure isn't necessarily going to culminate in a material gain for her. And likewise, if there's a Scorsese film that's showing at Cannes, it will translate into some kind of box office and so forth. But then, for the kinds of filmmakers that we were showing at a place like New York Underground or CinemaTexas, they're more in an Yvonne Rainer situation, where it's not like them showing at Anthology Film Archives is going to result in a glorious payday down the road.

EH

We just didn't want to run an organization where we were constantly asking artists to do things for free. We didn't think that was the right way to run an organization.

AK

How did you set it up to do that?

EH

So, at first, we did a kind of indie-rock model where we gave people a cut of the door. That was good and that was necessary at first because we had no money to begin with. Once we had a little more money, we started having a set fee instead. We didn't want people to suffer because their show didn't do as well as someone else's, for example.

AK

You also didn't want to curtail your own program by saying you can't show those obscure things.

EH

Right, exactly. We had a set fee. What we realized is that by doing weekly shows, and in a sense, doing something like a festival but spreading it out over the whole calendar was so much easier to deal with financially. Having little bits of money rotating throughout the year is much more reasonable than trying to raise all of this money for a one-week event. Budgets for festivals are, by their nature, completely chaotic because you almost can't tell what your budget is until the event is nearly happening. Having a slower rhythm and smaller group of screenings is much easier to deal with, in comparison to doing a festival.

TAUSIF NOOR

And now you're certified by W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for the Greater Economy), right?

EH

Actually, W.A.G.E. is an interesting thing, because Lise Soskolne was the person running the Industry City artist studio project who brought us on. She was already talking about the ideas that would become W.A.G.E. at that time. We were very much a part of the first conversations about W.A.G.E. with her.

AK

Do you pay yourselves?

EH

We do, but we have to be flexible.

TB

Whatever is left over. Then, we figure out what we can pay ourselves. It can vary dramatically from year to year, which is why we've always had other gigs.

EH

But we get great exposure!

TB

I see them as related to Light Industry. It's not like we have a day job and then we do Light Industry. If Ed teaches at Bard, or if I'm a Programmer-at-Large for film at Lincoln Center, or I do some project at MoMA, or Ed writes a catalogue essay, I see them as all part of a shared enterprise.

EH

We budget payment for ourselves. We don't always meet the budget.

TB

It's optimistic.

EH

We have an optimistic budget, and then we have reality. But that said, we have this office. We have this space. We've been doing shows for ten years. I think we're making it work in other ways. We're not starving, so we're fine.

TN

When did you move to your current location in Greenpoint?

EH

We moved here in 2012. We were at Industry City for two years. Then we shared a space in downtown Brooklyn, as part of a public/private partnership, for a little less than a year with Triple Canopy and Public School NYC. And then, after that space ended, we were without a space for a year. That was awful. But we did a lot of interesting programs nonetheless.

TB

Offsite. When I say offsite, there was no site. We couchsurfed from venue to venue.

EH

We had a series called "Couchsurfing" where we'd do an event at a different place every time. I'm proud to say that one of those was the only time, and perhaps still the only time, that Film Forum ever let another organization do something at Film Forum in their space.

TB

We showed Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) right after the civil disturbances in London.

EH

The riots that happened in 2011. And that was a real honor because we love Karen Cooper and admire her greatly. Film Forum began as something very much like Light Industry, and she's kind of a hero of ours. That was really cool.

TB

To follow up on what you just said, Film Forum used to look like Light Industry in the 1970s: folding chairs, a loft. But we don't desire to be Film Forum as it exists today. I love Film Forum, but I think that that's really an important dimension to how we think about Light Industry, which is that we want it to maintain this modest scale. It's a very deliberate choice.

EH

We want to stay small, which is weird for a lot of people, the idea of why we would want to do that.

TB

I think there's a way in which growth is understood as a presupposed ideal for a nonprofit arts organization.

AK

That growth somehow equals success.

TB

Exactly. Like if things are going well, then you're getting bigger. We're very much of the mindset that the issue of art and culture in New York is not one of quantity. It's not like if there were 50 more galleries then things would really be happening in New York City. What we'd prefer is to have two people,

whatever their bandwidth allows, and let that determine the breadth of the program. Over the past decade, that's usually meant a different program every week. What's nice about that is that not only is it much easier to manage on a financial level, as Ed mentioned, but it's also easier to telegraph to a public because you're able to lavish all of your attention on that single show for the week. There's nothing else going on. Again, we love film festivals, and they're a completely vital platform, to this day, for film exhibition, but things can get lost in the shuffle. And things can get lost in the shuffle in a film program at larger institutions. If there are multiple screenings every day, it's very easy for something to slip through the cracks. Whereas at Light Industry there's a focus, and you get that email each week. You read the email and it's very easy to stay 100 percent on top of Light Industry's program; nothing really escapes the attention of people who are interested in what we do. And there's something manageable about coming, too. It's not like there are a million screenings and you can't keep up.

AK

Do you feel like you have reached your ideal capacity? Or do you feel like you still have room to develop?

EH

Well, obviously, we would love if every single show was sold out. That is something that's not going to happen. We have good turnout, generally. But, in terms of growth for us, we just want every show to be full.

AK

Right. But you don't want a bigger space? Or do you feel like where you are structurally, as an institution, is where you want to be?

EH

We like this space, and we would like to continue having a space pretty much like the one we have. Given what New York has to offer to a small budget organization, this is, I think, ideal. We don't want the space itself to get substantially bigger. We like the intimacy of the room.

TB

The size is just right. If it were smaller, it would be too small. I think the size is perfect for our average audience.

AK

How many people does it seat?

TB

Well...

EH

It seats 75 legally, 100 physically.

AK

That's a great size.

TB

There's something about the size that's significant, because it's not simply a good fit for the typical number of people who come to Light Industry, but there's also something about the social psychology of a screening that's shaped by the space. For instance, if 80 people come to tonight's screening, people will be packed in. There will be something electric about everyone together in this room, shoulder-to-shoulder. Whereas if the exact same number of people came to see that screening in the Walter Reade Theater, let's say, which seats several hundreds, the turnout would seem maybe okay, but a little thin. Some of that charge would be gone. It's so funny how the exact same people watching the exact same film, but in a different space, means that the atmosphere of the encounter is altered completely.

AK

Right. When we did the Babette Mangolte tribute at Lightbox Film Center, there were about 130 people there, but it's a big auditorium. It seats 400 people.

EH

Here, for example, given the size of the room, let's say if 20 people show up tonight, it won't feel empty.

AK

That's a good balance.

EH

Exactly. We also want the freedom to show the most unusual and obscure items we want and not care about that. Operating a small space gives us that freedom in a way that other film venues might not. They may have box office

goals per week that they need to meet, and they need to program in order to meet those goals. We don't program like that. We think of the program as the entire year's budget. We have an entire year's budget for artist fees, an entire year's budget for rental fees, and so on. We see ticket sales only as part of our income. They're not the determining factor of how we program.

AK

Where does the money come from? I'm assuming it's not just ticket sales?

EH

Ticket sales are still a healthy chunk. We make as much in ticket sales as most small arts organizations would love to get as a grant. I think, for last year, it was something like \$12,000. That's a significant amount given our small overall budget. We have grants that we get from the city and the state and from foundations. We do fundraising. And our major fundraising, since about 2012, has been a yearly art auction. We realized there are all of these people who are artists and such fans of Light Industry. With that kind of goodwill, and those kinds of relationships, we started doing the art auction.

TB

There's a lot of goodwill from artists toward Light Industry; artists have been incredibly generous with us. Artists end up being often not only the people who give the work, but also the people who buy it. There aren't a lot of collectors, I suppose, that come to Light Industry. Maybe there are, and they just haven't introduced themselves. I think that's a way in which we're different from a museum, where there's very much a class of people who are the key patrons of the organization. Having art auctions has been really crucial. It's how we've survived.

EH

Once in a while we've done editions and we've raised a little money there. We'll continue to do that as well. Basically, fundraising, grants, and ticket sales are where the money comes from.

AK

Do you have an advisory board?

EH

We have a board of trustees.

AK

Is that a financial kind of board who helps with fundraising, or does it have an advisory function?

TB

Both.

EH

We keep the board relatively small. Again, it's part of this ethos of wanting it to be small and manageable. We want people who understand the mission we have and want to support that mission rather than say, "You guys need to grow," or "You guys should start a TV show." Those are all great things, but that's a different kind of organization. Most of our board consists of filmmakers and curators, actually.

TB

Take someone like Brian Frye, who is both an erstwhile microcinema person who co-ran the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema, but is now a professor of copyright law. He's our lawyer. Or Max Weinman, who is a young filmmaker but also, as his day job, works in commercial real estate. He's our real estate guy. When we were dealing with our landlord, he completely saved us, negotiating all of those particulars and looking at spaces. When there's a problem with our HVAC, Max has an HVAC person.

EH

And Ruby Lerner is on our board, who used to run Creative Capital. She did an amazing number on our budget. She's awesome because she knows everything from the highest end to the very small in terms of running organizations. Before she was even a board member, she sat down with us, looked at our budget, and whipped it into shape.

TB

Everyone has an active role in shaping the organization, and has their own set of skills that they're bringing to it. Nobody is just there to sign a check. And also, our board is...

EH

Super active. Jeff Preiss and Max Weinman, they've literally been here with their cars lugging stuff for us. When I say they're part of the organization, it's more so than with other boards. They've put in actual shoe leather and really work with us on stuff. We are just a text message away from, I would say, the

majority of our board, where we're asking them questions, and we're easily in contact. I think we have a more intimate relationship with our board than a lot of other organizations do. It's formal, for sure, but they're always there, in a way.

TB

This is going back to something you mentioned earlier, in terms of growth for the organization. It's not that we don't want Light Industry to change. Definitely, we want its scale to remain modest and its scale to remain, essentially, two people. But for instance, for us to be paid salaries commensurate with our experience, in a way that we wouldn't have to worry about every single month, would be nice.

AK

Right. So, you wouldn't have to do your other jobs necessarily.

TB

Exactly.

EH

Or not all of them.

TB

Basically, stability. Maybe that's a better way of putting it. I think that my dream would be that Light Industry would essentially be the same as it is now, in terms of the structure of its program, except we wouldn't be sweating it every month.

EH

Right. That we figured out our finances without having to change what we do. I think that the problem we've noticed over the years with a lot of other arts organizations, especially the small ones, is that in their zeal to fundraise, they can really just mangle and reshape what they are, until there's a point of, "Why are you even doing this?"

AK

Right. And sometimes, going after particular grants, you are asked to rearticulate who you are as an organization, and before you know it, you're another type of organization.

EH

We have a very clear function and a clear goal. And that's what we do, and that's what we're sticking to.

AK

So, there's the two of you. Is there anybody else employed by Light Industry?

EH

Well, there are paid staff for specific purposes. For example, Chris Jolly, tonight, is a projectionist. He's paid. We pay projectionists, when we use them. We don't always use projectionists. In fact, I'm usually the projectionist, which I really enjoy doing. But for tonight, for various reasons, it was easier for us to have a projectionist. We pay installer people, when we have things to do in the space. We have a bookkeeper. So, there are paid people, but nobody full-time.

AK

You're the core.

EH

We're the only people that would be, technically, salaried.

AK

Can Light Industry survive without you? Would it be the same?

EH

No. It dies without us.

TB

When Flint Jamison was here, he asked, "So what are you guys thinking long term?" He was alluding to Light Industry after us. And I just laughed: "We're taking this to the grave!"

EH

We were in an organization for a while called Common Practice New York. I realized through doing that that there really are two kinds of small arts organizations. There are some that are little institutions, something like Artists Space that's not like contingent upon a specific person running it. It's created out of a structure, and it runs, and it has a board, and it has directors, and those people can be interchanged. Then, there are other spaces like ourselves

or, let's say, Participant. We're two really good examples. You cannot take Lia Gangitano out of Participant. What would be the point? You can't take us out of Light Industry. To take us out would then create something totally different.

TB

Also, the structure without us, in terms of a financial and institutional structure, is so feeble. There's not a lot we can hand over to someone.

EH

It's like having a tiny restaurant that's run by a chef that makes one kind of pizza. If that guy dies, you could keep running that restaurant, but it's not going to be the same restaurant.

TB

So, in this scenario, we are the two old Italian guys taking forever to make the pizza.

AK

Do you think of yourselves as an organization, at this point, now that you've been around for ten years?

EH

Yes.

TB

Totally. In a way, Light Industry is like an agency that we run, a way that we can organize all of these different activities like writing about film, showing films, and teaching film history. Light Industry is mission control for all of those things.

EH

Right. And while we clearly are the core of Light Industry, and it couldn't really happen without us, we can't stress enough that we have always had people around us who either volunteered to take tickets and such, or have been on the board, which is essentially a form of volunteering. We've rarely done it alone at the events themselves. We definitely want to say that we're not soloing it here. But we're the core for sure. We're here every day in the office. We're doing the core work.

AK

How do you think about your

audience? And is it the same as your community?

EH

A lot, actually.

TB

I think that our audience isn't a monolith. I think that, as we were saying before, part of the whole idea of Light Industry is that we would be bringing different kinds of audiences together through the design of the program. I think that one of the things that we do with every show is to think, "Okay, if we show this film, there's going to be audience X for it. But then, what is the possible audience beyond that?" I think that's a key concern of ours, because in New York City, there is already an existing audience for all kinds of things. But the possible audience is another matter entirely.

I think that what we really try to do with our announcements and the writing that goes along with the shows is to think of every screening or every event as a new opportunity, specifically an opportunity to make the case to a broad audience for the work that we're presenting. The idea is that someone gets this email that says, "Next week, at Light Industry, some movie you have never heard of by some filmmaker you have never heard of." But then, hopefully, the notes will be the argument that can convince them that they'd be kicking themselves if they don't go, even though they've never heard of this thing.

AK

Right. Then at some point, maybe they trust what Light Industry does enough that maybe they would come to see anything that you do.

EH

They do. When we talk about these different communities, the most common way we've been positioned by other people is as a fusion of the film world and the art world, which I don't think is incorrect. Those worlds aren't the same social scene, and don't always speak the same language, but they have many overlapping interests. So yes, we definitely will see some people show up for films that they probably would not go to if we weren't showing it.

TB

For instance, I remember one of our first shows was a lecture by Dan Streible, a brilliant film historian who teaches at NYU, about silent-era boxing films,

which was a very popular genre at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the people who came was a Golden Gloves guy from Jersey, I think a boxer or a boxing coach. Probably not someone who would go to a film history lecture, typically. When I say there's the audience and the possible audience, if a film historian at NYU gives a lecture at NYU, there's already an audience there. But there's still an audience beyond that particular audience who could potentially be interested. You just have to do the work of finding them and making the case in a way that appeals to them.

TN

This is actually something that Alex and I were talking about earlier — the idea of curating for taste and developing your own taste. But at Light Industry you're also thinking about your program with an audience in mind: Not only showing things that people would not have seen, but also showing things that would allow people to develop an interest in seeing film generally.

TB

I think there's a line of Amos Vogel's that Ed likes, something to the effect of "You're not just curating a program, you're curating an audience."

EH

Yes, the work of the film programmer is not just the selection of the films, it's selecting the audience. And the cultivation of the audience.

TB

Maybe selection is not the word, but it's more like you're building the audience. With Hollywood films, there's a multibillion-dollar global apparatus forcing this kind of work into the culture. Whereas the audience for a Stan Brakhage film or whatever is only going to exist because it's actively developed from the ground up.

AK

And it can change someone's life. That's what happened with Babette Mangolte, right? She comes to New York. She meets

Brakhage. She wanted to see Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967).

I'm curious to hear more about the parameters of your program. What was that hole that you wanted to fill? Do you program for a whole year out at a time? And what is it that makes the Light Industry program? What is your mission around it?

EH

We should maybe go back to the beginning. When we started, there were certain ways of running a film organization that were considered just *how you do things*. You had a paper calendar, and so you planned everything out many months in advance to meet those print deadlines. We decided, at the dawn of social media, we would just dispense with all of that. We would do everything online and we would have no printed materials. Today, that doesn't seem so strange, but in 2007/2008, that was still unusual. And so, at the very beginning, we joined social media to promote Light Industry. Partially, it was a financial reason — we needed no money to do that. And partially it was our own interests, as we were both very internet-forward. But then we realized it also gave us this enormous flexibility, once you're cut off from those print deadlines. We'd plan some things months in advance, even years in advance. And some things happen last minute, and that's great.

TB

There are some shows that have been cooking for years.

EH

Or there are concepts. Actually, we've had the concept of showing a Babette Mangolte film, literally, for years. For various reasons, it didn't happen. We looked at one print; it wasn't very good. Babette was going to do something herself, and at the last minute it didn't happen. The idea just kind of kicked around until we had something to anchor it in, and we did it.

TB

Like I said, some things will be simmering for years. For instance, we have been talking to Vaginal Davis, at this point, for years about doing a Light Industry show. It still hasn't happened, but it could, hopefully.

EH

She wants to do it. It'll happen on drag time I guess.

TB

But that's a good example of how our conversations can be long-running. We also might have a space on the calendar, then we have an idea, find the prints, whip up the notes. Three weeks later, it happens.

EH

I mean, a lot of it is us up late at night on the phone, and we're like, "What about this?" We're kicking around an idea, and then, suddenly, we have a show, and we just do it in three weeks.

AK

Do you have to agree on everything?

EH

Yes.

TB

Well, yes. We're on the same page about most everything. Generally, we're both very excited about each program, so that makes things easy. However, there are certain times when one of us is very, very enthusiastic about a show, and the other one is maybe a little lukewarm on it. But ultimately, we'd rather it be that one of us is incredibly excited about something, and the other one maybe a little less so, than for us to come to a tepid compromise that neither is thrilled about.

EH

Yes, and we divide our shows similarly. Some shows, both of us work on equally. Some shows are more me, some are more Thomas. It depends on the show. It depends on our interest. It depends on our schedules.

TB

I think what makes Light Industry really work as a duo — as opposed to it being just one of us — is that one of us comes up with an idea for a show that's really quite good on its own, but then the other does something to refine it more precisely still. That's practically every week at Light Industry. It's one of us having a seed of some idea, and the other cultivating it. Or one of us writes some notes, and the other edits them. It's this constant back and forth that really, I think, animates the program. It's just nice having that feedback when one of us is keen on a screening, and the other is unsure. If

something is a little lacking, or if something is a little undercooked, it's great to have someone else there to tell you. When I mentioned the candor before, if one of our immediate instincts is "Ugh, no," then we don't have to cloak our reservations in careful diplomacy, like you would at a regular job.

EH

We don't take a meeting and talk about it. It's interesting, when we really fight about a show it's often about the most minor difference.

TB

It's about a comma or something. Sometimes we'll almost completely agree about something, but we'll get into this heated exchange about it, even though we fundamentally think the same thing. But anyway, it's a working relationship that would seem totally outrageous to most people, I guess.

EH

We're always checking what everyone else is showing. We have a kind of standing rule that we've broken a couple of times, but in general, we won't show anything that has been shown in New York in the past five years. That sets a challenge for us to really find things that have not been shown, and I think people come to us for those obscurities. That's one thing. The other thing that I think has become a Light Industry signature show is the unusual pairing that epitomizes this collision of worlds that we talk about. For example, next week, we're showing William E. Jones's *Finished* (1997) with Antoni Muntadas's *Credits* (1984).

TB

Bill did one of the first Light Industry shows. He introduced Fred Halsted's *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972) at Light Industry like ten years ago.

EH

That was a truly in-person experience. But this is more of a repertory thing. We rented it. But, in this case, *Finished* is a film that premiered at Sundance, and it had a VHS release. It is not an editioned object, it is definitely in the world of independent cinema. Muntadas's piece is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix. It's something that is usually shown in a gallery on a loop. It's undoubtedly an art world piece. Yet, formally, they speak to each other in so many different ways.

TB

I think that if repertory film programming has a classical form, it's the double bill. Oftentimes at Light Industry, we look to that form, and then try and come up with something that's surprising but that, ultimately, makes sense. A good

example is a Busby Berkeley/Workers Film and Photo League show where we screened *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) — one of the flat-out masterpieces of American musical cinema, choreography by Busby Berkeley — with a suite of reels produced by the Workers Film and Photo League. What was interesting to us is that these movies, at first glance, couldn't be more different. One is among the most lavishly orchestrated musical productions that has ever come out of Hollywood and, in turn, the commercial cinema, while the Workers Film and Photo League was a cadre of artists and writers who were taking junked, silent-era cameras and using them to make these urgent dispatches of hunger marches and workers demonstrating at a Ford factory in Detroit. The crowds in Detroit were fired on by hired goons, and the title cards for that film are unforgettable: "They asked for food and jobs. They got bullets!" Another reel is of a bonus march where forgotten-man soldiers from World War I are marching on Washington to get the bonuses that they were promised yet never received. They set up Occupy-style Hoovervilles on the White House lawn, and then troops were sent in to burn them to the ground, which the Film and Photo League documented. But, to get back to Busby Berkeley and *Gold Diggers*, people always remember "We're in the Money" — the opening sequence — but less well-remembered is that it's totally ironic, because right after that the sheriff comes and shuts the production down. They're even trying to take costumes off of the performers.

EH

A lot of the narrative is the showgirls at home starving. The whole thing is much grittier than you remember, and seeing it alongside documentaries of real life, real struggles, amplifies those qualities.

TB

One of the most spectacular sequences in *Gold Diggers* is about the Forgotten Man. The same ones who were in those Hoovervilles in the Film and Photo League films. Here, then, were two contemporaneous and yet totally distinct articulations of the same moment of social crisis.

AK

They're coming from different disciplinary spaces.

TB

Exactly. That, to my mind, is a good example of how you make a double bill that's not obvious, but where there's something very fruitful about the pairing.

AK

Do you feel like those are

boundaries, or that those things wouldn't be allowed to sit next to each other in other venues?

TB

Well, people just wouldn't show them together. In this case, it's more that the Workers Film and Photo League material is extremely underappreciated.

EH

That's like labor history.

TB

And if it's shown, maybe it's in a documentary history context or something. But, typically, when people are showing Busby Berkeley films, they're not showing them with these hunger marches.

EH

Another film organization may show a short before a feature that somehow matched with it, but if you look at our calendar, the way we frame these screenings, you'll see that we don't see the program as the short before the feature. We think of that as a double bill of two equal works, the short and the feature have equal value. That's how we write about them, that's how we title the shows. That, to us, is a major difference. It's subtle, but I think it says a lot about how we approach the materials and what we think of the relationship between them.

AK

This is a space that you've carved out for yourselves that you wouldn't be able to do, say, if you worked at another kind of organization.

EH

Or if you did, it wouldn't have the same meaning.

TB

There's also something about the nature of repertory film programming that can leave a lot of things out. For instance, an auteur-driven series is the form that continues to predominate. That's certainly not always a bad thing. You can have a big show where you see, say, all of the Lois Weber movies at once. That's something that people enjoy, in the same way that they enjoy going to a museum and seeing a monographic retrospective. However, in the case

of Barbara Loden, who hangs on our wall here, she made one of the great American films of the 1970s, and didn't make anything else. There's never going to be a *Directed by Barbara Loden* retrospective, because there's only one film to show. And there are so many other ways in which work can get left out, if there isn't an auteur with a sizable body of work behind them. With amateur films, or pornography, or any number of other genres or historical moments or modes of moviemaking, there might not always be a Howard Hawks behind them, but that doesn't mean that they're not of consequence.

AK

Right. You've talked a lot about that cross-disciplinary space, and you've mentioned the microcinema. Around the time of the *Into the Light* exhibition at the Whitney in 2002, there were a lot of debates about where experimental film is located within the museum, and you've talked about how you're also a contemporary art space as much as you are a film space. There's so much discussion about the white cube vs. the black box. Where do you see yourself in those lineages and debates?

EH

There are two ways we could answer. One is that we've often done outside projects where we've been called upon to enter the institutional art world and say, "What do we do here with the moving image?" For example, we did a film series for *Greater New York* at P.S.1 in 2010, that in effect expanded the number of artists in the show. When we worked on the Whitney Biennial in 2012, we totally reconfigured how the film series is done there. They came to us not wanting the same kind of film series that they had done before, but rather a rethinking of what the film program could be. But when we do those things, we very pointedly don't say that it is Light Industry. We say: "Thomas and Ed of Light Industry." We made that distinction because we thought it was important that it be understood that Light Industry is its own venue. It's not just everything Thomas and I do. That said, obviously those things are very tied to what we do.

TB

I used to draw this hard line in thinking that Light Industry was a space, and it's simply not the case that everything we do is Light Industry. But then, as time goes on, it seems like the distinction is a little silly. It is just two people, and we're using the same workspace to pursue all these different projects.

AK

Do you think Light Industry has to be attached to the space?

EH

No, it's its own venue. It's not simply a roving curatorial project, and I think people wanted to read it like that because that's a more familiar way to read those kinds of activities. We just want Light Industry to have its own identity.

AK

On Google you're listed as a movie theater. Are you a movie theater?

EH

We're a movie theater as much as any nickelodeon in the 1910s was. Architecturally we're not that different.

TB

In terms of our relationship to contemporary art, one thing about Light Industry, with virtually no exception, is that every program is an event. You come to the movie, the lights go off, the movie happens. It might be a very unusual screening, like Maurice LeMaitre's *Has the Film Already Started?* (1951), but nevertheless, it's an event. You're not swanning into the gallery, looking at something for a few minutes and then leaving.

EH

The event is the key. For example, a funny thing happened early on, as Light Industry started getting a lot of art world press. We'd say, the show starts at 7:00 p.m. People would be showing up at 8:30 p.m., and we were like why are you showing up now? We realized that they thought it was an opening, where you show up at the end because that's the best part or something. And it's like no, you just missed the whole thing.

TB

There's 15 minutes left of this movie.

EH

Or we had this *Art Monthly* write-up that listed the show as being up all week. No, it's not. It's happening one time. It's a kind of re-education to insist that this is the form of the exhibition. This is not an ancillary program of a larger show. That's the other thing to talk about, in terms of how institutions do film screening series. Very often it feels like the film screening series at art institutions is something extra, to the side of everything else. It doesn't have its own independent existence.

Architecturally, it's interesting because we talk a lot about the dynamics of the black box versus the white cube. We don't use those phrases internally, but we think of it more as like the "lights down" and the "lights up." For us, this space is really great because we want it to function both ways. We don't want it to be a black box where it might be great when the lights go down, but it feels weird to hang out when the lights go up. On the other hand, we also don't want to simply be a gallery space that then kind of shows movies. If you notice, architecturally, what we've evolved into has been a gray space. Literally, a gray space.

TB

Especially the Josiah McElheny piece. Have we talked to you about this? Josiah proposed to us this suite of paintings, which are now permanently installed in the space, as long as we're in this space. There are wall paintings and then these fabric paintings, which function as custom masking. There's a 16:9 version and a 4:3 version, which is up now. They're on Z-bars, so they can be adjusted to a wide range of formats — if something is 1.66:1, say, or something is 1.78:1. You can adjust ever so slightly to accommodate virtually any aspect ratio.

The main part of the space has walls that are a Benjamin Moore Classic Gray. Then there's a special video projection paint. The Benjamin Moore Classic Gray looks white and the white projection paint actually looks kind of gray. Its darker tone allows for blacker blacks and better contrast, but then it's also brighter because there are tiny glass beads mixed into it.

With those two elements, Josiah made wall paintings that are an homage to Blinky Palermo's wall paintings, where the composition is determined by the shape of the room. It's a hand's breadth that determines the width of the border colors. Those are all done by hand. There's a very subtle, soft edge to it, as opposed to if you just did it with tape. There's a softness, really, to the whole room, as opposed to it being all white, which is what it was before. Josiah's intervention very subtly makes you more aware of the shape of the space.

AK

It also speaks to flexibility.

EH

Quite honestly, it's pleasant to look at and to be in when the lights are on or off. I think it enhances the room as a social space when the lights are up, and it also enhances the projection quality when the lights are down. That says a lot about what we think about the goals here, of what we're using the space for.

AK

We were talking about the gallery space and your devotion to getting a good print. Can you tell us about how you decide to settle on showing something in its original, material medium?

EH

We're incredibly aware of the medium when we show it. We're certainly not fetishists for showing things on film for the sake of showing them on film. But that said, we do love a good 16mm print.

AK

So, you won't not show something because it only exists now as a video?

EH

These things become a factor in our decision of not just what to show, but how to show it. We like to show film because we can, and we do it well. There aren't that many places that show 16mm specifically. Sure, in New York there are a few places that show 16mm. Generally, you've got some museums. A small space like this doesn't usually show it. In part, we like to show good 16mm prints because if not now, when? And if not us, who? When we can show a print, we do. But we don't necessarily refuse to show something if we can't find a print. The showing itself is the event. That liveness is not something exclusive to the film medium. It's the event. It's being in the space. It's coming here. It's having the discussion afterwards. That's what we're providing as much as access to the work itself.

TB

With film programming, it's always this question of what is available, and then, how is it available. There might be a beautiful print of it and that makes things a little easier. Or maybe there's a print, but it's not in good condition, though there's a really nice digital scan of it. You're having to consider all of these

variables. In any case, we always begin with what it is that we want to show. And then we're figuring out what is the best possible way, given the materials available, of presenting it. It's usually some combination of prints or other formats.

EH

A lot of people might be able to get a film projector, but they don't really know the nuances of how to showcase that print in the best possible way. That goes for digital media too. I'll give you an extremely common problem with showing video in the art world. Again and again, because people are used to doing things as installation, they will set up their projectors to go floor to ceiling. The problem with that is, when you sit down with an audience and watch something, let's say, with subtitles, nobody can see half of the screen. This has happened a million times. It drives me absolutely up the wall when that happens. But that's just because people are not really thinking it through. They're not thinking through the event itself, and the experience of it.

TB

Aspect ratio is another problem of the art world.

EH

We've often used the phrase "events, not objects" to talk about what we do as a shorthand because, again, we're not doing an exhibition of objects. We are hosting an event. That's a very different thing than a group of objects. With a group of objects, all of the work goes in ahead of time, the opening happens, and then it just kind of runs. For us, all this work goes into it ahead of time, and then the work continues into the actual event itself. That's where we're really working. It's not like we're having an opening and drinking.

TB

Well, we *are* drinking.

AK

You talked a lot about the ecology of the film world, the art world, and New York. Where do you see yourselves within that? Who do you think of as your peers?

EH

There's a newer generation of film programming that has happened in the early 21st century that we absolutely feel like we're a part of.

TB

And this is a golden age in New York City right now.

EH

There's Metrograph, there's UnionDocs, the Quad, Spectacle. There's a newer generation of curators at various other places.

TB

There's also new blood at Lincoln Center and MoMA. This moment that we're in, I'm obviously biased, but I think that it's never been so good for repertory cinema in New York City. Look at something like Screen Slate, which is really important to the film culture of our moment because it's chronicling all of these screenings, what's going down not just in theaters but also in galleries. You'll get an email that will say this is what's on today at Light Industry, Metrograph, Film Forum, BAM, etc., *and* there are these films at Ortuzar Projects *and* there's this Jack Smith show at Artists Space.

EH

We're definitely part of a film programming community, but we're also part of a small arts organization community. So, again, we're the overlap between those two worlds. We would consider Participant a peer and close friend. Artists Space, Primary Information — which shares our space here — Triple Canopy, those kinds of groups. Those are the ones we've grown up with, and we're in contact with and we consider them peers. Interestingly, in both film and art, some are nonprofits and some are commercial, and there are also newer gallery spaces like Bridget Donahue, among others, that we feel we've also grown up with.
