

Conversation with
WASSAN
AL-KHUDHAIRI,
the Contemporary Art
Museum, St. Louis

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,
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WASSAN AL-KHUDHAIRI,
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Wassan Al-Khudhairi is the Chief
Curator of the Contemporary Art
Museum, St. Louis.

With Alex Klein and Xinyi Wan

ALEX KLEIN

You've worked in a few different
contemporary art contexts and in
different capacities. What is your
current role at CAM St. Louis?

I'm Chief Curator.

AK

How long have you been there?

WA

Almost one year.

AK

Is CAM St. Louis a collecting
institution or a non-collecting
institution?

It's non-collecting.

AK

When was it founded?

WASSAN AL-KHUDHAIRI

WA

WA

In 1980, but it wasn't in this building. It was an institution that was founded by people in the community. Cultural leaders and artists in the community came together and founded this museum. It was in a few different locations before this building, which opened in 2003.

AK

How many square feet is it?

WA

The building's footprint is 17,100 square feet, but the building is an irregular shape. The total public and private space is 25,200 square feet. The exhibition space is kind of tricky because we have different places we use, such as parts of the lobby, but I would say maybe 8,000–10,000 square feet if you add it all up.

AK

What is your exhibition cycle?
How many shows are you doing per year?

WA

CAM has three exhibition cycles per year: fall, which opens in September and closes in December; spring, which opens in January and closes in April; and a summer cycle opening in May and closing in August. With each season there could be anywhere from one really large exhibition that's using up all the spaces, up to four or five in one season, where there's a project here and a project there throughout the building.

AK

What is the total staff size at CAM?

WA

Sixteen full-time staff.

AK

And the curatorial team?

WA

The curatorial department is three people including myself. I'm the Chief Curator, and then we have our Assistant Curator Misa Jeffrereis, and our Registrar Jen Nugent. Everyone's wearing multiple hats because we're a small institution. Our registrar is also our exhibition manager and coordinator, and

the head of the prep crew. We bring a lot of freelance people to work on exhibitions. And we have security and front-of-house staff who work part-time.

AK

It's not so dissimilar from the way we work here. Where does the funding come from?

WA

Our annual operating budget is around \$3 million. The funding is mixed. We get some local corporate funding, we get local grants, we apply to national grants, and we get individual support.

AK

Has that become a large part of your job at CAM? I know in some institutions there are a lot of fundraising responsibilities as a curator.

WA

Since my last two jobs, I have noticed that it has become more and more part of my role as a curator. Particularly working in the U.S., I would say. I think a big part of it is to help locate funds and to help make exhibitions happen.

AK

You mentioned that CAM originally grew out of the community, and I know you're relatively new to the institution, but is that community still involved in the institution? Does it feel like the institution has a mission that has been pretty consistent over the years or has that evolved over time?

WA

I'm still understanding the history, because I'm still fairly new here, so I'm still wrapping my head around that. I've spent some time here looking back at the history of exhibitions at CAM to try to understand how they've shaped the institution. My understanding now is that there are definitely people who

were integral to the museum’s establishment and are still involved with CAM—whether at the board level, at a board emeritus level, or just involved from the very beginning. They’ve shared stories with me about being one of the people who worked at CAM when we moved into the new building.

You’ve got folks that were part of creating the museum—some of those people are still involved, some are not, and some don’t live here anymore—but we definitely have an active and engaged board. Then you have the people who have been part of the history, who in a lot of cases are artists, which is nice. CAM has a long history of working with artists, and we still do this. We hire a lot of artists to work at CAM, which means that several of my colleagues are artists, a lot of the prep crew are artists, and we occasionally hire artists to do special design campaigns or marketing materials. Wherever I turn this past year, I meet someone who has worked at CAM, so my joke is that every third person I meet worked at CAM, which is interesting. It means that the institution has a large extended community.

AK

Do you think that changes the investment of a local community in the institution if so many people have participated in it actively.

WA

Yes! I think when you’re in a small institution the investment of staff is different anyway. When you work in a large institution, it’s a completely different environment. The kind of relationship that each person has to the institution is quite different when you are working as part of an 80-person team versus when you work in a 16-person team. In a small team, communication can be easier, but also, if one person is out of the office, sometimes things cannot happen.

AK

Before I go deeper into the specificity of working at CAM, I wanted to take a step back because you are still relatively new to the institution. I’m curious about what drew you to it as someone coming from the outside, considering that you’ve worked in other kinds of museums.

WA

This is the first time I'm working at a non-collecting institution, so that's very new for me. That was something that I had to think really deliberately about, and I had to consider whether I wanted to make that step. I'd only ever worked at collecting institutions prior to this. At collecting museums, I always felt a responsibility of connecting exhibitions to the collection in some way. I was always thinking about how exhibitions and projects can be conversations with the collection, even if they're not from the collection. The collection always served as a starting-off point or as a way to help frame something.

Moving into an institution without a collection is a shift: There's a sense of freedom, and there aren't these parameters to work within, but at the same time, it can sometimes feel too open-ended. I want a little bit of the limitation because that makes me feel like I have to push harder or think in a more creative way about something. So, I've been thinking about what grounds the program at CAM: If it's not the collection, what else can help guide and anchor the program?

Collecting and non-collecting institutions are both necessary, and for me, CAM is an opportunity to think about exhibition-making in new ways. Before moving to St. Louis, I was at the Birmingham Museum of Art (BMA), which is a large, encyclopedic institution. That was my first job— working at an encyclopedic institution as a curator of modern and contemporary art. Before that, I was in a modern and contemporary art museum, so it was quite different from the encyclopedic museum. Each step has expanded my curatorial thinking in a different way, and somehow those things compile to form my perspective now.

AK

That's really interesting to think about. What are the differences between the contemporary in relationship to a more historical context of a collection and a kunsthalle model? I'm not sure I'm always thinking in a historical context in a non-collecting institution. The contemporary fits in differently in an institution that is encyclopedic in nature, and even the artists that are considered "contemporary" are sometimes different.

I'm curious to hear you speak more about your working

methodology now that you don't have a collection or historical parameters to rebel against or critique, or be in dialogue with. Does CAM have a particular mission with regard to how it engages with the contemporary?

WA

It's not clearly articulated in the sense of trying to define what contemporary is. If you look historically I would say that CAM has worked mostly with artists who are living, but in the year that I've been here, there have been a few exhibitions in the program that have been of artists who aren't living. There was a Salvatore Scarpitta exhibition last season, and there's a Basquiat exhibition next season. I think there are different ways that the institution has decided to look at or think about contemporary art, and I think it's nice to have the flexibility to exhibit the work of a non-living artist if we feel it fits in the program that season. We embrace a more fluid approach: if there's a way to approach the work of a non-living artist through a contemporary lens, then we might decide that it's something that fits in our program. For example, although Salvatore Scarpitta is no longer alive, the motivation to do an exhibition of his work was to consider the contemporary nature of his performance practice, which is something that hasn't had much attention. That was compelling enough that the institution decided it was something that would be interesting for our program.

I remember, for example, when I got to the Birmingham Museum of Art one of the first big conversations we had as a curatorial department—between myself, the curator of American art, and the curator of European art—was about defining what the cutoff date should be in the collection for modern and contemporary art. Where does modern end; where does it begin? That was driven by the registrars, because the database, TMS, can't be fluid—it needs to be clearly defined. You have to put every object from the collection in a certain category. Those conversations arose as a result of the need to organize and categorize the collection for practical reasons, but it's difficult to define those dates from a curatorial position.

AK

That's a great point. It's not as if the contemporary begins in 1963 and that's that. I'm also thinking about things that might hold contemporary relevance for a moment that might technically be from the past.

WA

Or we can look at them through the lens of something we're going through today in which they have a difference resonance.

AK

Totally. How far out do you plan? Because you are still relatively new, I'm assuming you're still in the middle of exhibitions that you probably didn't propose yourself.

WA

My position was vacant for about a year, so our director, Lisa Melandri, has been curating most of the previous year's exhibitions and this next season. Ideally, we'd like to be two to three years out in our exhibition planning and I am trying to catch up to that. I would say that right now we are scheduled a full year out, maybe a year-and-a-half. It's still a mix of some travelling exhibitions along with exhibitions my director has curated.

I've been able to put things in the calendar, but I haven't been able to shape a full season of my own yet. The first full season that I'll be able to shape is the one that starts in May 2019. It's not as long as you have to wait at some institutions, but at the same time, it feels like a lot of pressure to build the program and get caught up to being two to three years out. I'm trying really hard not to succumb to that pressure because I don't want to put shows on the calendar just to say that I'm caught up. I really want to do what I say I want to do, which is to be thoughtful and understand the context of the museum and the multiple communities that we serve before I just start filling the calendar.

AK

Maybe it's nice that you have this first year to get your bearings in this institution and the location you're living in, and to get to

know things before you're just all of a sudden in the middle of your own show. What is your first exhibition going to be?

WA

I curated my first exhibition before I started, and it opened a month after I started. I've had exhibitions within each season since I began my position, actually. There was a gap in the calendar; I was hired; but I didn't start right away. I took a summer to finish some other projects, so I curated a show and then I joined. It was part of the Fall 2017 season.

AK

Okay, that's great. You were able to ease in and still have a stamp on some things.

WA

Yes, so in fall 2017, I curated *Hayv Kahraman: Acts of Reparation*, which was a solo exhibition, and in the Spring 2018 season I curated a solo exhibition of Trenton Doyle Hancock, *The Re-Evolving Door to the Moundverse*. I also curated the current Summer 2018 exhibition, the Great Rivers Biennial, which featured work by Addoley Dzegede, Sarah Paulsen, and Jacob Stanley. The Great Rivers Biennial is an exhibition and program that CAM has been doing for the last 16 years and this is the 8th edition. As a curator for that project, you work with three local artists that have been selected by an outside jury. You support and guide the production of new work and the staging of the show. For this edition, the artists were selected by Christine Kim, Lauren Haynes, and Martin Kersels. They reviewed the applications that came in through an open call and then selected 10 artists. They came to St. Louis and conducted ten studio visits—this took place before I moved to St. Louis. Of the 10, they selected three, and those three each received \$20,000.

AK

Are they all St. Louis-based artists?

WA

Yes, the Great Rivers Biennial is an incredible opportunity for local artists. I've never worked at a museum that gives this much funding to local artists. It's not something we would be able to do without the funding and support of the Gateway Foundation.

AK

That's amazing, and it ties in nicely to my next question: How do you see your institution's commitment to the local within the context of the national? Does it privilege the people who are in your own backyard alongside all

of the other artists that you work with?

WA

Yes, and that's something that's been going on here for a long time. I think the thing that's really fascinating about St. Louis, as someone who's still new, is that I've observed there's quite a good amount of resources and financial support for artists in this city. I want to live in a city where there are lots of artists. At CAM, when we host the Great Rivers Biennial, the local artists are shown side by side with other artists. This year, the artists are showing with Amy Sherald; two years ago, it was Mark Bradford showing alongside these artists. The Great Rivers Biennial is not only about the financial resources and exhibition, but it's also about providing the opportunity for these artists to expand their community, their contacts, and their network within the art world, which I think is also an important part of an artist's growth.

AK

So, you're also creating a sustainable platform for the generation of artists coming out of St. Louis that will hopefully feed back into your work at CAM. Do you show artists from St. Louis at any other time in your program, or are they really only present in the Great Rivers Biennial? Is there an engagement outside of that?

WA

There is. When I first got here in 2017, there was an exhibition that featured three St. Louis artists titled *Color Key*, which coincided with the exhibition Urban Planning: Art in the City 1967-2017. Another program we organize with local artists in mind, in addition to the Great Rivers Biennial, is Open

Studios, which is an annual program. It's a city-wide weekend of studio visits organized by CAM. Anyone can participate, and we produce maps and online materials for all participating artists and program talks by curators in some of the studios. It takes place every October over two days and helps connect the St. Louis community to artists.

Something that I feel I often have to talk about is that there are many ways that museums can work with local artists; it's not just about making an exhibition. When I was in Birmingham, it was much harder to be able to be nimble and curate something in a short amount of time. Everything required a longer lead time. In that context, I found an empty space in a building that belonged to a law firm, and they let us use it. We wanted to create a space to engage with local artists in some way. We realized, for example, that artists lacked studio space to create work and there weren't many spaces to show their work either.

We created a five-month temporary program called Shift, which was a satellite contemporary art space where we paired a contemporary artist with a creative person, let them use the space for a whole month— however they wanted to use it—and just asked that at the end of the month they do some kind of public-facing program. In every case, the groups made art, and actually ended up making something to show, even though that wasn't a requirement. It was a really great building block for me as a curator, to get to know artists and work with them in this intimate way. And even though the museum was apprehensive at first about the project, I think it was successful.

The museum was interested in having the people we were able to capture and engage in this offsite space at the museum, but I felt strongly that we needed to first develop relationships and build trust. Then, we could bridge people back to the museum. We saw that this strategy worked: six months after the end of the project, I opened a contemporary show at the BMA called *Third Space: Shifting Conversations About Contemporary Art*, 2017. The visitor numbers were higher than any previous opening and many of the people we connected with offsite at Shift were now coming to the museum.

I think that we have to be creative because we only have so many exhibition slots and only so many gallery spaces. We have to think creatively about how we can use them.

AK

That's a really good point. I wanted to backtrack for a second because you mentioned that your director had curated some shows. Does your director normally curate or was she really just stepping in to fill the void of

not having a chief curator for a while?

WA

She curates shows every once in a while. I think in the time when there wasn't a chief curator, she had a lot more exhibitions on the calendar. Like many directors, she was a curator first.

AK

What is the process for getting shows on the calendar? In every institution it's so different. How much autonomy do you have as Chief Curator to implement your vision? You talked about having a full season coming in May. What is that process like on your end?

WA

Every place I've worked in has been so different. In Birmingham we had to come up with an idea, I had to go to the curatorial department, had to get consensus there, and then I had to do a presentation to each department over the course of six months. You had to get everybody on board or keep adjusting your project. Then there was this big moment where people would then say "Yes, you can do it," or "No, you can't do it." That's its own kind of thing. The job I had before that was as Director at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, where I was responsible for the program. That was really more complicated because there were a lot of stakeholders. So, yes, I was the director, but there were other key players that were involved in the decision-making.

AK

Were those funders or were those other people in the museum?

WA

Those were the original founders of the museum, who served in positions overseeing the museum and weighing in on the artistic choices. The museum was part of a larger museum's authority, an umbrella institution that also had an executive director, who is in the royal family. There were a lot of different relationships that had to be maintained and managed so it had its own set of challenges. At CAM, it's my responsibility to develop the artistic program. I

think because it's a fairly small team, the process is much more organic. I have an open dialogue with my director on a constant basis, which I think is really great because we're constantly sharing ideas. A few times in the last year, we've gone to different exhibitions or fairs together, so we're starting to see and understand a little of what my vision might be for CAM as I try to figure out what it is for myself.

AK

How would you describe your vision?

WA

I feel like it's really in the early stages of its formation. I am still so new. I think it's about keeping an ongoing conversation with my director and for me, it's also really important that our assistant curator is part of the process as well. Because we're such a small team, everyone has to be involved in everything. So now, we have a couple of these brainstorming conversations that we are going to start implementing regularly. We met recently, and I said, "OK, let's do these more regularly, because there are good ideas that come out of them." I'm in a transition phase where there's a lot to learn. I'm trying to learn our director's working style, but also our assistant curator's working style, just to see how we can bring these different things together. I know things that I don't want and I have bigger ideas of things I know I kind of want, but I don't know how it forms a systematic division yet.

I know that I want us to make sure that we have a program that feels balanced, and I know that every once in a while, we need to have something in our program that has a little more popular appeal. There is a balance between wanting to feel like we're connecting with international, global issues, but through the lens of being in St. Louis. That's something that's also very important to me. There are a number of these different key pieces that I've been playing with to see how they all fit together.

AK

So, for you, it's important to have relevance to the local context and that it not just be an expression of your personal taste, per se, but that it reflects where you are situated.

WA

Yes, absolutely. The other thing I've been doing in the last year is just meeting the other curators in town and learning about all the different institutions.

AK

Can you talk about that institutional landscape that you're in? How does CAM fit into the ecosystem?

WA

Our literal neighbor, with whom we share a courtyard, is the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. I can see them right here from my window. The Pulitzer is a foundation, so they have functioned in different ways over time. I think I'm here at this very interesting moment where they're really looking outward and they're really trying to be a place that is open and welcoming. They've expanded their hours. They're an interesting kind of neighbor for us to have. They have fewer exhibitions a year that are on for a longer period of time and have a very scholarly approach to everything that they do.

As a foundation, they have a different funding structure, which allows them to produce larger scale projects and publications. We share an audience: a lot of people that come to CAM go to the Pulitzer and vice versa, so there's a good synergy. Our teams are constantly in conversation, and I meet with curators there fairly often. Our Learning and Engagement Department meets with their team as well. We coordinate calendars and we have a good collegial relationship. In learning about these institutions, I'm beginning to understand how our program fits into something, or where the gaps are and how our program can address the gaps in the overall cultural offerings of St. Louis. We also have the Saint Louis Art Museum, which is the big museum on the hill. It's a large encyclopedic institution, so they present a wide range of exhibitions and programs. They have an active contemporary art program and collection. They are the museum in town offering the big blockbuster exhibitions that draw in the crowds. They're also located in Forest Park, which situates them near the zoo and the Missouri History Museum, and you'll often find people who were enjoying the park popping into the museum for a visit.

There's also the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University. All these institutions are collecting. The Pulitzer has a few permanent pieces—they're not an ongoing collecting institution, but the Kemper is also collecting. They're located on the campus of WashU and I think for them, the audience they serve most immediately is their campus, faculty, and students. They have a permanent collection gallery that rotates every so often with different themes. They're currently undergoing an expansion, so they're closed until fall 2019, when they'll reopen and have an additional gallery space. They have an interesting ongoing contemporary program. They have two curators and their director curates fairly actively as well. They do a range of different exhibitions. They have a slightly more focused agenda on what first and foremost serves their campus community, and then going

beyond that. There's also Island Press, which is a press at WashU. I didn't really realize how active they are, but they have a visiting artist every year who comes and works with students and creates new work that then enters the collection at the Kemper.

AK

That's great— it sounds like you're a part of a really rich community.

WA

Yes, and that's not talking about any of the independent spaces, and there are a number of those as well. There's an active number of artist-run spaces in town as well. I spent the last year trying to go to as many different spaces and attend events and openings to get to know the landscape and meet artists. Because spaces are fairly spread out across town, there isn't one single district where all the art spaces or artists' studios are located. As I mentioned earlier, CAM hosts Open Studios with these artists and has for a long time. It's so hard to understand where our studios are in St. Louis, and if you're not a curator, you don't know that you can even visit an art studio.

We gathered some analytics after the last edition and learned that the program brings a lot of visibility to the participating artists. Last year, they reported over \$10,000 of sales of art over that weekend with all the people visiting and buying art. That's another program or service that I think we've been able to give to the community and the artists of St. Louis.

It's quite rich, and it's been interesting to explore and to learn a new landscape, which is quite different from Birmingham, where I recently moved from.

AK

Right, so you can see yourself being in St. Louis for a while and really digging in.

WA

Yes.

AK

That's exciting. You mentioned that you've been a director before, and you decided to move back in to a chief curator role. How did you make that

decision—between the context
in Doha and the regional context
you've found yourself in in the
United States?

WA

I think the short answer is that it all happened very quickly. When I moved to Doha, I went there to be curator for a collection that had been amassed by someone from the royal family and given to the government with the mandate that it be used as the core to found a museum. It was an amazing opportunity for me because it was a collection of objects by artists that I had read about, but didn't have any access to, so I was really excited about that.

The first year of being there was focused on how to transition the collection from private to public and what that meant, which is really about registrarial activity. This included establishing a database and understanding what was really in the collection, things as basic as the number of objects in the collection, having an image for every object, and assigning each object an accession number. When I joined, there was a building designed for a museum and there was a project manager, who was my boss, and within nine months, he was no longer there. I was the first person he hired, and by the time he left there were only really two other people working there. So, I stepped in to keep things going, but that became so much more, and before I knew it, I was acting director and then I was formally made director. I was there for five years; the museum opened three years after I started and I worked there for two more years.

Leaving Mathaf was one of the most difficult decisions I have made, because founding a museum is both an incredible opportunity but one that's also a labor of love. The museum felt like another limb. I built the team, and we worked together on the building and to open the museum. I made the difficult decision to leave because I realized that I still wanted to be a curator and that I didn't have my fill of that. I was really conscious that I didn't want to be a director that curated all the exhibitions. Nobody wants to work for someone who doesn't let them do their job.

AK

Exactly. That was sort of what I was getting at with my previous question about your director curating shows.

WA

I think that there definitely was a self-awareness for me, and I didn't want that to happen, so what that meant was being real with myself. It was hard

because some people were saying, “You are young and you are already a director, if you walk away from this it could make it much more difficult to become a director later.” But for me, it was about being honest with myself about what challenged me and what kind of work I wanted to be doing. When I sat down and wrote out what that was, it was clear to me that right now that’s what I wanted to be doing; I wanted to be a curator. It was definitely a difficult decision but it was really about coming to terms with what I really want to do, what it is that compels me about the field that I’m in, and being brave about it. Whatever happens later will happen later; maybe I’ll be a director later, and maybe I won’t.

AK

I think it’s so interesting to go from a place where you really are integral to the founding of the mission and then dropping into somebody else’s mission and trying to figure out how to implement your own vision within that. They’re really different situations.

WA

Absolutely, and I think I’m in a good place now. I would say that one of the things that I felt frustrated by was that after I left Doha, I first went to Gwangju to finish curating the Gwangju Biennale, and then eventually I decided to join the team at the Birmingham Museum of Art. My role there was Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and I was full curator. I realized, in the course of the time that I was there, the thing that frustrated me was actually going from director to curator. I wanted to be at the table for strategic conversations. I wanted to be part of the discussions for the museum’s strategic plan, or how to think about our exhibition program in a larger, more holistic way. Before going to Birmingham, while I was still in Doha, I participated in the Getty Leadership Institute. That program helped me learn how to think strategically and be analytical. I like thinking about the big picture and looking at an institution as a whole. After Mathaf, I didn’t want to be a director but maybe curator wasn’t the right step either, or at least not at a larger museum. I think that being in the Chief Curator role at the institution I’m in now has allowed me to have a seat at the table and to be part of strategic conversations that shape the direction of our institution. I think I landed in the right place for where I am in my career now.

AK

That's really great. Thinking about frustrations, I wonder if there's any immediate frustrations that you've had in your current context, and I don't mean that in a negative way, because I think frustrations can be very productive. What are the roadblocks you've had to confront so far?

WA

I've gotten such a warm welcome here after moving to St. Louis, but it's not a secret that I'm coming in after a fairly controversial thing happened here at CAM with our Kelley Walker exhibition in 2016. I knew there were going to be some challenges coming into this context and I have tried to focus on rebuilding trust, reconnecting with particular individuals, communities, and organizations that were really not happy with CAM and wanted to distance themselves from the institution because of the course of events that happened. The silver lining that I see from what happened at CAM is that people do not get that upset about something if it's not important to them. I think there is something really powerful in thinking about how to harness that reaction into something positive. Yes, people were very upset, and whatever your position was at the time: whether you agreed or disagreed with the exhibition, the artist, and the reaction, the thing is, there was a strong, passionate reaction. I think you could only feel that way if you care about something and if you feel that it's important enough to be vocal about. If we can do something great that can also have that kind of reaction, then that's promising to me.

People see this institution as an important place in their community. There's work that has to be done to rebuild some of those relationships, but I think that there's something very positive there, and I think that people that I've been reconnecting with have shown me a lot of kindness and are welcoming my intentions to want to rebuild and reopen conversations. So, it's complicated; time is something that helps. But I think there's a combination of actively reaching out, as well as creating a deliberate, thoughtful program and hopefully, that will help us move in the right direction. I know our visitorship and numbers have continued to grow. When you look at the bottom line, looking at numbers—which is just one metric—the numbers have been steadily growing.

I would say, overall, in general, people have been very generous and I've asked them to tell me what they really think. It helps to know all the different

ways that people have seen and experienced what happened here, because that's the only way I can get a full picture. It's a challenge that we're all facing as curators right now, in terms of thinking about how to make sure we remain thoughtful and what it means to be relevant. We know we want to be relevant, but what does it actually mean? What does it look like, and how does it manifest? What are the things I can learn from what happened, both internally, in my institution with my colleagues, and externally? Internally, it's all about having conversations early about the program: getting past my insecurities of not being ready to share an exhibition with colleagues yet because I don't have a checklist, and sitting down with everyone and saying, "Here's the artist I'm thinking about; I don't know what we're going to show yet, but here's some of the work. Everyone look at it, think about it; here are some articles. Is there anything I'm not seeing? Are there any blind spots I'm not aware of?" I feel like I've tried to work in this way, talking to educators early on in the process—but it never ends up working because institutions are so big. It works here because the learning and engagement team are literally outside my door.

AK

So, it's impacted your curatorial process in a way?

WA

Absolutely! It has! You can't come into an institution after what happened here, and just go about your daily business. Like, everything I had done and everything I've thought about, up to this point, has been through the lens of the Kelley Walker exhibition at CAM. It has to be. It is all a part of this institution's fabric now.

AK

At the end of the day it also goes back to questions of trusting a curator. There was a trust that was broken, right? Even though it preceded you, you have to step into that role and think about how do you rebuild a conversation. One of the interesting things I thought about in that instance is that it really culminated in dialogue. The exhibition was there, but it was really in this moment of the conversation where the conflict

occurred and that curatorial responsibility came into focus of how to articulate what was going on, and it's where that breakdown happened. How does that inform your understanding of curatorial responsibility in the context that you are in?

WA

I think that there are a couple of different aspects to that. There's trust and responsibility between curator and director—or in my case, Chief Curator and Director—because that is just one level, and it's your responsibility to the artists and audiences, or the multiplicities of communities and audiences you serve. I think that there are certain ways that we have to be aware of how we make certain decisions. Maybe not every artist should do an artist talk. Maybe, sometimes it should be someone else talking about the artist, or the curator talks about the artist's work. I think there are a number of things that came together to create the events at CAM.

AK

Maybe it goes back to the question earlier, when you were talking about relevance. Maybe a work is relevant for you, but it may not be relevant for both you and your audience.

WA

Right, yes. What does it mean to be relevant? Who are you being relevant to?

AK

We all talk about audiences and communities. How does that get discussed in your institution? Who are you doing this for?

WA

Our Learning and Engagement Department has started an initiative called the One Mile Radius and it's this ongoing deep look at who is in our one-mile radius. They have this great list and this awesome interactive Google map. It's an internal tool. I think it's about understanding that we want to be hyper-local, local, regional, national, and international. It's a conceptual

circle moving outwards. I found that the One Mile Radius approach is really interesting because it is really hyper-local. We talk a lot about who is in the one-mile radius. There are specific people involved; there's a lot of schools, so we have a lot of engagements with those schools. There's also a lot of churches, so there is a particular person in our engagement team that goes to their events and tries to understand who works there and creates a relationship. We say "Hey we're your neighbor, did you know there's a contemporary arts museum in your neighborhood?"

I think what's tough as a curator is that we have to look at these different layers and try to see some of the topics of conversation that punctures all of these layers, that could feel like something that's relevant to those in our immediate surroundings but also have a larger conversation. I would argue that maybe sometimes you could choose and say we want to focus on this thing because it's super relevant to people in our one-mile radius or the people in our community in St. Louis more than the international community. But I think that the ideal is to find something that kind of connects all these different layers of communities in some kind of way.

What is relevant? This is one of those questions that I can't answer, and everyone is going to answer that question differently. I think it's about taking a risk, taking a chance. I feel like in every exhibition, with every idea, with every artist, there's a big risk that you take. And it's important to find multiple access points to the subject you've decided you want to present. As a curator, I see myself as a mediator working to find and present different access points to an artist's work. How can we create more avenues for people to enter the work that the artist may not think of? In our role of intermediary between artist and public, how can we create more channels of connections with people?

AK

You've worked internationally, from the Gwangju Biennale to Doha, and you've lived and studied all over the world. How do you think about that local-global conversation? On the one hand we can think of every place of having a regional specificity, but then on the other, we're each working in a specific region and trying to make connections globally.

WA

I thought quite a lot about this when I curated at the Birmingham Museum of Art. When I got to Birmingham, I noticed how everyone talks about Birmingham being in the Deep South—the South being a big way to define one’s identity. I thought it was really interesting that when people spoke about the South, in Birmingham, they spoke about it in relation to the American South. I began to explore the possible connections between the American South and the Global South. I started to tease that out and realized, actually, there are quite a number of similarities in some of the bigger ways one might define a place as the Global South. It’s not very definable, but you can generalize that issues such as access to housing, clean water and education are shared concerns. I think with some of these issues, there’s too much pride in the American South to admit that these are concerns, but some of the poorest counties in the U.S. are in Alabama and Mississippi. So, I was really interested in that and curated a show that took its title from Homi Bhabha’s term “third space,” connecting Frantz Fanon and Edward Said’s ideas with those of Bhabha. I built a show that had a rigorous theoretical framework, but I didn’t talk about Homi Bhabha or Edward Said in the labels, though it had a place in the catalogue. I used the museum’s collection because so much of it had never been seen. I’ve tried to draw these parallel conversations by bridging the American South and the Global South, defining their point of intersection as the “third space” where these cultures overlap. The exhibition was organized in sections under themed headings, which included ideas of identity or the movement and immigration of people, as well as landscape and how landscape becomes a part of identity.

In Doha, I curated a Cai Guo-Qiang exhibition that took its cues from local histories, but connected to Chinese history and traditions. It started with me wondering about how to curate a Cai Guo-Qiang exhibition that didn’t look like what he’d already done in Bilbao or New York. I asked myself, “What makes this an exhibition in Doha and not anywhere else in the world?” We talked about that, and Cai was doing research on his hometown of Quanzhou, which is in the Fujian province on the coast of China. We took a research trip there together—it has a rich history, and was historically a stop on the Silk Road. There’s an old mosque and a cemetery with tombstones inscribed in Arabic. Everything about the project started to have these abstract connections. The exhibition was based on the idea that there was once an exchange and movement of people between these places, and it investigated the historical relationship between China and the Middle East.

AK

That’s great.

XINYI WAN

Speaking of that, I was just wondering, are museums or institutions always responsible for relating a certain topic to a global audience? Or do museums always need to address their local audience?

AK

This is also a question of relevance. In the way that you're talking about bringing artists to a local community and having relevance where you are, and vice versa, does it need to have relevance for international conversations? Does what you're doing on the ground in St. Louis become packaged for export? How much does being part of that global art radar, outside the immediate circuit of the Midwest, affect the internal conversations at CAM?

WA

Broadly, do institutions have this kind of responsibility? I think it depends on the institution and the kind of mission that they have. I would say that — again, every place I've worked at has had a different way of thinking about that — and I think for CAM, it's about serving locals first and foremost. We look at who our visitors are. About 50–60% of our visitors are local, and about 40% are regional, and we have about a 3% international visitorship. I think that what we want to do, first and foremost, is to prioritize serving people who are in our immediate community. I think that it's really great to have something here that connects to a bigger picture.

However, I think that it is also nice when what you're doing in your context can have a larger impact or be in conversation elsewhere, and I think that the times that happened in a successful manner is in fact when you're engaging through something local, because it makes it unique. It makes it different. We can do a Cai Guo-Qiang show and it's a Cai Guo-Qiang show. But an audience in Doha might be more interested if Cai Guo-Qiang is doing something related to Doha. I think it actually brings you back full circle; it's

just about where your feet are planted. It's like a lighthouse. I'm here and I'm looking out, and then I'm bringing the world back in and it's going back out. Of course, everybody wants to have their exhibition reviewed, but that shouldn't be what's driving your decision making. I think if you focus on the right things, it creates something that gives the kind of visibility you're talking about.

AK

It's interesting. In our work with RAW Material Company, the way Koyo Kouoh thinks about her work is, she says, "Dig where you stand." So that's perhaps another way of talking about that. CAM St. Louis is obviously someone who we think of as a peer—we think about contemporary arts organizations internationally, too—but I want to hear your reflection on who you see as your peers, both real or maybe even imaginary. Part of this project is about imagination and thinking about how we all might reimagine our institutions. At ICA, we talk a lot about whether we're an institution and what that means. But then also thinking about why we are an institute and you're a museum, and what does that mean? Those are two questions in one but go with it.

WA

We define our peers based on the size of the institution and budget. CAM Houston is often the one that comes up fairly often in terms of size, scale, and the kinds of projects they do. Your institution also comes up, although there is the museum vs. institute thing. I've never really thought of the name as something that would make it different, but mainly the criterion ends up identifying what other institutions in the United States are non-collecting.

AK

Just to conclude, I'd love to know what you're excited about in the

near future. What are some of the things that you're eager to do and to see happen?

WK

I'm looking forward to learning more about St. Louis and expanding my circle of colleagues and friends. And at CAM, I'm really excited to shape the program and find new ways to create connections both within St. Louis and beyond by working with artists and collaborating with like-minded institutions.
