

# Conversation with YATES NORTON, Rupert

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,  
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber  
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute  
of Contemporary Art,  
University of Pennsylvania

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YATES NORTON, Rupert

Yates Norton is Curator at Rupert, Vilnius, Lithuania, a center for art and education devoted to establishing close cooperation between artists, thinkers, researchers, and other cultural actors through interdisciplinary programs and residencies.

With Laurel McLaughlin

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LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

What is your role at Rupert, and how long have you worked there?

YATES NORTON:

I was asked to join the Rupert about two years ago and I'm working on the curatorial team. I am currently curating the public programs.

LM:

How many employees work at Rupert?

YN:

There are seven of us. We just got a new director, Julija Reklaitė. Vitalija Jasaitė is Deputy Director. Gabrielė Marija Vasiliauskaitė is Coordinator and Regina Vanagė is our accountant. There are usually two interns who come through an Erasmus scheme or through a partnership with the Vilnius Academy of Arts. And then there are three of us on the curatorial team: Kotryna Markevičiūtė, Tautvydas Urbelis, and myself.

LM:

I wanted to touch briefly on your trajectory that brought you to Rupert. We met at The Courtauld Institute of Art, where you worked with Professor Katie

Scott on early modern decorative arts and material culture. What has been your path in the arts since then?

YN:

I chose Katie's course partly because I loved the way she writes, which is characterized by her curiosity and its receptivity to the object of her study. What I learned from the course and Katie's extraordinary teaching has been very helpful in terms of my thinking. I've just curated an exhibition, *Living Ornament*, of brilliant contemporary artists. The exhibition largely draws upon many things we discussed in the MA program.

I felt a bit betwixt and between after completing the MA, since I'd been studying the early modern period, but I knew that I wanted to work in the contemporary art field because I also enjoyed thinking about the work of practitioners who weren't dead! Afterward, like so many people who graduate from university, there was a period where I was trying to find different positions in a competitive field. I did a full range of things: I worked as an artist liaison, and I worked for two art consultants putting together a collection, and then I did a lot of my own projects with friends of mine who predominantly works in poetry and literature.

Then, with my very dear friend David Ruebain, with whom I've continued to collaborate, I did a whole mix of projects. David is a disability rights activist and practiced in that field as a lawyer, and he's informed a lot of my work that I've done at Rupert and elsewhere. I knew that I wanted to work in a publicly-funded institution. I was asked to join Rupert, I liked what they did, and I was happy to get out of London.

LM:

Thank you for sharing that journey. So, you joined Rupert about two years ago, and you mentioned that it was founded about five years ago. Could you tell me about how Rupert began—its institutional founding and impetus?

YN:

It's quite interesting really. It started as an itinerant educational platform that was resistant to the idea of an institution with a capital "I." In 2013, it moved to a new building here called Pakrant , which was set up by a businessman, Darius Žakaitis. As I understand it, the initial idea was to have an arts and

education center in the context of other creative industries with the hope that there would be synergies and collaborations between them. Rupert very quickly developed its own identity.

Over the past five years, the ideas and aims of the institution were concretized. Broadly, we have three program areas. One is the residency program, the second is an alternative education program, and the third is the public programs, which include public talks and exhibitions. They're all very much intertwined, partly because we're a very small team and partly because it makes sense to share ideas and resources with each other.

LM:

The alternative education program is really intriguing given the Eastern European context of Soros Foundation Cultural Centers. Was Rupert founded in response to, or perhaps in synergy with these centers?

YN:

I don't think it was developed in that way. The alternative education program was essentially what started Rupert. It began with all of the beautiful curiosity, a sort of irreverence and sometimes dark humor that you see in a lot of artists' practices in Lithuania. The program equips emerging artists and practitioners in the cultural field with the contacts, tools and knowledge to develop their work, but I think we've also tried to maintain this sometimes aimless, often joyful, and always curious approach to learning, both for the participants and for us.

I would say that the program is certainly informed by similar projects and initiatives by those associated with Rupert, such as Robertas Narkus, who set up the Vilnius Institute of Pataphysics, or a roaming residency in a field in Lithuania called eeK Igrinda. What's more, we as curators also learn considerably from the participants. All of this, I would say, has been the basis of the program rather than specific institutions per se. The program was developed to provide a space for learning that may not be available at more established brick-and-mortar institutions. It also gives us a chance to explore different fields of enquiry in a collaborative environment.

LM:

To go back to the building for a second, which I've seen online, you weren't always in that space?

YN:

Right. Before my time, Rupert was itinerant and as I understand it, makeshift. Since 2013, we've been housed in this new building called Pakrante, an arts incubator for a number of creative industries that was created with some EU funding. It's quite a beautiful space.

LM:

I haven't yet been to Vilnius, but in looking at a map, Rupert is a bit further north than some of the institutions in the center of the city such as the Contemporary Art Centre, MO Museum, and the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Center. Can you tell me more about the area?

YN:

It's in an area called Valakampiai—I'm currently walking outside by the river as we chat—and it's in a beautiful, predominantly suburban and wealthy part of the city. It's about 45 minutes from the center.

LM:

As organizations crop up, we're interested in the communities in which these spaces are situated. What kind of communities is Rupert a part of?

YN:

We make links with certain local organizations such as an old people's home. We are more aligned with the city center and its artists and arts organizations. For many of our residents, the key reason for coming here is to be outside very busy metropolitan areas from where they often come. It's really a place to have time to think; I would understand our residency as being about having a "room of one's own."

LM:

And then, being a bit further afield, could you tell me about your relationships to other institutions within Vilnius?

YN:

Vilnius is a small city and its cultural scene is intensely dynamic and very busy—which is wonderful. We try to forge inter-institutional dialogues and sharing of resources; I'm really keen to keep developing these links and associations across the city. It is vital both for sustainable institutional

practices and I think just for one's general sense of well-being. Nobody wants to be in fierce competition with each other, and so these connections can be as simple as taking our visiting guests to dinner at the artist-run restaurant Delta Mityba, or using the CAC's brilliant cinema for screenings, or doing a talk at the National Gallery. Ultimately, it's about committing to keeping up the conversation with all the incredible artists, curators and educators in Vilnius. I'm touched by how generous this community can be here. As an example, outside of Rupert, I curated an exhibition at a new space called Atletika, and it was just amazing how we could borrow things from the National Gallery, Autarkia—which is Robertas Narkus's space—and work with people all around the city who were so dedicated and curious in spite of, or perhaps because of, resources not being so abundant and the fact that there was an absence of a lot of bureaucratic restrictions.

LM:

This might relate more broadly to your thoughts about the notion of an institution, but we're curious about how the organization adopted the name Rupert. Your organization's website also uses the word "center," and you mentioned that it was founded with perhaps alternative conceptions of "institutionality." Does Rupert consider itself an institution and if so, how and why?

YN:

I can't speak for the people who decided on the name Rupert, but I think the idea behind it was to have something slightly awkward and bumbling, which the name Rupert perhaps conjures. Rupert is also a distinctly non-Lithuanian name. Rupert has a strong international standing and we're seen as an idiosyncratic arts center in Lithuania and one that stands out.

As I said, the beginnings of Rupert were in this itinerant artist-led organization, and even when it moved into this new building by an award-winning architect I think we've tried to maintain a sense of curiosity and exploration, alongside negotiating the increasing administrative and managerial demands of working in a more established institution. Names are quite powerful ways of acting as a reminder of that initial identity. The challenge, and something I'm interested in the context of organizations, is how to institute structure while also remaining open and responsive to all

those that make up the institute. This means asking what the relationship is between *instituting* and *constituting*.

One key element here is acknowledgement. Like all institutions, we wouldn't be an institution were it not for all of the people that are part of it and maintain it. They have to be acknowledged and included. In the publication that I edited and made for the five-year anniversary last year, this is something that I tried to honor in the course of developing the book. Ultimately, it did not seem right to have a bound book; it would be too formalized and too finished. I wanted to make something more open, based on Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Literature"—something generous, generative and ongoing to keep open the possibilities of including others. In a way, I hoped the book would be a reflection and extension of our institution. The designer Vytautas Volbekas was instrumental in bringing this idea into being.

Another, is negotiating resources, forms of management and administration in ways which sustain the employee's commitment to and interest in this field of working. How do you hold maintenance in play—keeping things going to avoid collapse—as well as resistance to oppressive or exploitative working conditions and building in the time to reflect, consider, make mistakes?

It should be said that Rupert is lucky to have a certain level of autonomy and doesn't have the huge scale and accompanying bureaucracy of other institutions. I am grateful for this.

LM:

That's great. We usually asked about boards and the kind of relationships and responsibilities that institutions have with their boards. Do you have a group that advises Rupert?

YN:

We have a board, yes but in many ways, we as a team just get on with it. We work with our budget and certain requirements and then we organize what's important for the residents, public, and local scene as best we can.

LM:

That's fantastic that you have such autonomy. What does a typical season look like at Rupert?



YN:

In terms of the overall public program: we have regular talks, seminars and workshops by local and international speakers. Then, every year we have a big exhibition at Rupert. The first was a group show, *Entangled Tales*, which I curated with Rupert's former director, Juste Jonutyte, and then the most recent was *Jonas Mekas: Let Me Dream Utopias*, that I co-curated with Juste Jonutyte and Kotryna Markevičiūtė. In 2020, I'm co-curating a show with my colleague Kotryna Markevičiūtė and the brilliant artist and former Rupert resident, Leah Clements. In addition, every year we do an institutional exchange. For example, I curated a show of Robertas Narkus at David Dale Gallery in Glasgow, and Max Slaven, the director, will bring Stuart Middleton to Robertas' space, Autarkia, as part of the exchange in 2020. The first year I joined I did an exhibition of Lina Lapelytė and Indrė Šerpytytė at Kim?, Riga, with Rupert's former director, Juste Jonutyte.

In terms of the alternative education program, we work closely with the participants in developing their individual projects through seminars, discussions and workshops led by local and international guests. In 2018, they presented an exhibition and in 2019, a zine and a one-night event/exhibition. This year, we'll see!

For the residency program we host up to three residents every month throughout the year, and sometimes more. There is no pressure for the residents to show their work, but sometimes they will present a talk at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, open their studios, screen a film, present a performance. We're really open to what they would like to do. It's great fun working with the residents and a real education speaking with them.

LM:

Do the programs have their own thematic aims or are they in sync with the exhibitions?

YN:

We have certain requirements to fulfill for the Council of Culture. But for the individual exhibitions, it's up to us to develop the idea. For the Jonas Mekas show, it was important for us that it would be less of an exhibition per se and more of a discursive platform. We used the space to bring together different encounters and perspectives on Jonas' work. We had a very busy educational and public program for that. Each program also responds to the other as all the curators are in conversation.

LM:

Is there a particular kind of artist or exhibition that you particularly

show? The exhibitions, from what I've seen, look extremely varied, and seeing as you organize exhibitions off-site, like at Kim?, and you even sang in the Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale—congratulations on the Golden Lion, by the way. What does Rupert gravitate toward in terms of artists, exhibition formats, or themes?

YN:

We tend to develop exhibitions that involve close cooperation with the artists, exhibition architects and others who make an exhibition happen. For Inđr and Lina, we developed the project with them, and the same with Jonas. He sadly died during the process, so we had to navigate that. We were keen for that show not to be a retrospective or an archival exhibition. It was a deeply personal project and we wanted to honor that as much as we could.

In terms of the kinds of artists we work with, they're often "emerging," I guess you'd say, except for the "big" shows each year where the artists are more established. We don't do "museum-style" shows, partly because of our identity and the structure of the organization, as well as the limits to the resources, expertise, and time that we have. Museums or comparably larger institutions have more time to research and develop an exhibition and more funds too. We don't have that, but I hope we try to make space for playfulness. For instance, we've often worked with two brilliant architects, Ona Lozuraityt and Petras I ora, who facilitate and frame curating in playful ways that a larger institution may not be able to (although the larger institutions in Vilnius tend to use exhibition architecture very innovatively). Together, we have thought through curating as essentially a practice of arranging things in space and emphasized this approach. In the Jonas Mekas show, we had the curatorial challenge of exhibiting poetry. We're perhaps more used to reading or listening to poetry, so how does one exhibit poetry in space, while also framing and contextualizing without adding more words through wall texts etc.? Working with the architects and knowing what Jonas would like, we developed something quite interesting.

LM:

Yes, I've seen some installation shots and it looked extremely innovative in terms of exhibition presentation. What's more, the

idea of exhibiting Mekas's poetry is extremely daring as well and demonstrates the malleability of your institution.

YN:

It was quite daunting.

LM:

I'm also curious about your collaborations on these projects—is this a typical working method that your exhibitions are co-curated? It's interesting to see how the dynamics of power in institutions shift with these kinds of partnerships.

YN:

For me, all work, and actually life in general, is collaborative. Nobody is purely independent. Collaboration is also key in operating sustainably, with time and with resources. I gave a talk at the ICA London with David Ruebain about the importance of interdependence and how we really need to underscore that in a range of contexts in opposition to ideologies of individualism and competition. This will be something that I am exploring in the 2020 public programs, which are guided by questions and practices of care and interdependence.

Collaboration also must entail acknowledgement, and this is crucial for thinking about dynamics of power, working methods and I think good management, if you want to use that word. I come from a family of dance, theater, and film, and if you watch a film, there are always credits at the end. I'm perplexed that often in the so-called art world, you see the artist's name but you don't see the assistants or those who clean the space or facilitate communication. Institutions have to unlearn certain habits that have become sedimented in this particular field of work that lead to not practicing acknowledgement. We can all learn to practice this more, and I think the very act of acknowledging can transform power dynamics and the working environment.

LM:

Keeping with this idea of interdependence and collaboration, you mentioned

that you often have exhibition exchanges. Are these exchanges mainly within the Baltic states or do they extend more broadly?

YN:

They extend broadly; David Dale is in Glasgow, for example. It depends slightly on who we connect with, but we have to think about what is important for us as an institution in terms of where we're located in the world and how we can develop in the future. It's important to establish links in the Baltic context. But we've noticed in terms of demographics for our programs and exhibitions, we don't always have participants from the so-called Global South, so it's important that we try to seek out these connections and collaborations meaningfully.

LM:

Sure, and that might partly stem from the misconception that the Baltic states are seen as peripheral to the rest of Europe. This has always been strange to me, but in terms of political history, as post-Soviet countries, perhaps that identity has lingered and, as a result, splintered possible connections.

This leads me to also ask about the political climate in Lithuania. As you know, many European governments are turning or have turned to the right or center-right. Lithuania's outgoing president, Dalia Grybauskaitė was center-right and it seems that the new president, Gitanas Nausėda, is as well. What type of effect has this shift in politics had at Rupert?

YN:

It's a good question. There's a very strong tradition here of good public funding for the arts. I think that the Lithuanian Council for Culture would like us to focus on regional and local art in response to a general tendency

of centering the capital city. I've only been here for about two years, so I can't say clearly whether I've noticed a direct impact of broader politics on the content of exhibitions. Of course, there remain issues relating to funding and how the arts are valued, not just financially but also ideologically. This can have an impact on the livelihood of cultural workers. I think things will change here over time in a good and sustainable direction, as long as there is the support network to complain, campaign and act in solidarity with other sectors.

LM:

That's a good pivot to funding.

A large part of this project concerns funding—from the levels of bureaucracy that control it, to the types of cultural currency that circulate.

So, getting into more fiduciary questions, does Rupert get funding beyond that of the Cultural Council?

YN:

The short answer is no. We're almost entirely publicly funded by the Lithuanian Council for Culture. There's not a big history here of private patronage in the arts. We also bring residents from different parts of the world through various schemes. The Nordic Mobility Fund allows us to bring Nordic residents here and then we also partner each year with a different residency or organization abroad, for instance in Finland or Spain.

LM:

And then, of course, artists are enmeshed within these precarious funding structures. Does Rupert compensate artists?

YN:

At Rupert, we do try to compensate artists and are always transparent about what the conditions are. We also discuss it a lot. For example, we had a resident, Joshua Schwebel from Berlin, who with our alternative education participants helped to develop a remuneration manifesto to think through questions of funding, compensation, and transparency. The burden of discussing the financial conditions should absolutely not fall on the artist.

LM:

Part of this transparency work includes accessibility. You mentioned your interests in disability theory and practice earlier, but in what ways specifically is Rupert approaching these concerns? This could be in terms of language—I see, for example, that your website is in both Lithuanian and English—or it could be other institutional changes and specific future goals.

YN:

Aside from language, we must think of accessibility broadly especially in terms of disability, and then not just in terms of handrails and ramps, which are of course important. We must think of accessibility in relation to practices of inclusion. And learning from the social model of disability, we must pay attention to how environments, attitudes, assumptions and policies can be disabling and exclusionary. Institutions have to be responsive and work into their fabric the means and the time to be able to respond—Karen Barad calls this “response-ability.” It can—sometimes has to—be a slow process, and not necessarily immediate. One has to be committed and listen and learn from the inevitable mistakes one will make.

In terms of programming, access, care, interdependence, inclusion cannot be regarded simply as “themes” to address only in public-facing programs. They have to inform working practices in the “back stage” of the institution. And so, even if these ideas and practices guide the public program I am curating in 2020, I hope they will inform how we—our guests and publics—work and interact in the future.

Lastly, I should say that some of the best resources concerning access come from our brilliant residents who have taught us so much. To name just a few, Avni and Rebecca Vaughan worked closely with us and put us in touch with sign language interpreters, which are free to use in Lithuania. Leah Clements shared an online resource she has co-produced called Access Docs for Artists, which is exceptionally helpful. And there are many, many more people in this field.

LM:

Sign interpretation is definitely not free in the U.S. I think your comment concerning the

expectations of immediate implementation is significant there needs to be more conversations between institutions and folks with disabilities in order to really understand what needs are, rather than to assume. Of course, these questions of accessibility deeply relate to community. Who is Rupert's community and is this synonymous with your audience?

YN:

That's also a good question. We have this big—I don't like using the word network, because it sounds so Google-esque—family of residents, alternative education participants and visiting speakers and guests. That is our community and also in many ways our audience. Our residents aren't obliged to make something for an audience, or for that matter to make anything at all to show. We have many residents who propose a project and then in the end they decide that they want to do something completely different and perhaps not show their work to anyone.

In terms of other programming, such as our public programs, we have a variety of audiences, who are mostly from the local arts and culture scenes here. We try and find ways of getting more people participating in our programs, and we also have regional audiences through a series of projects we do each year outside of Vilnius. I think it would be impossible to have a program that served several audiences fully. Perhaps why we do so much is because we're trying to think of various audiences and the different ways we need to address them.

LM:

It's wonderful that you're considering ways to reach out but also exploring ways to nurture existing relationships.

YN:

Yes, nourishing and nurturing existing relationships is very important to me. I know Rupert now has a big reach because of Instagram and Facebook, which is great, but I'm aware of the ways that this can become a disadvantage. All institutions need a slower, more committed and more considered approach to hold onto connections we've already made and to take time to negotiate

and acknowledge the various interdependencies that we are all entangled in. The difficulty is balancing that with the demands placed on cultural workers and artists to act and re-act quickly, as well as the energy, and perhaps even pleasure, that comes from working in a fast-paced environment.

LM:

This slow praxis seems to be a direction that numerous institutions are finding crucial as a working method. And this has led me to the final question I have, which is, what are you looking forward to either institutionally or personally?

YN:

I'm very grateful for all of the people I've met here. I've learned a lot from them, and I'm looking forward to further deepening those connections and conversations in a variety of ways. One of them is exhibition-making, and the other is thinking carefully about what programming can do, especially with regards to inclusion and listening. I'm interested in thinking carefully about what happens when various practices of care are "scaled-up" to institutional levels, while also unpacking what a term like "care" can mean, especially with regard to management, maintenance, and power. My brother works as a nurse and in some ways, nursing, care work and the cultural field have all been systemically undervalued, in terms of both remuneration and acknowledgement. What can they learn from each other?

I think that in all I do, I want to remain curious and try to remain vigilant against the oppressive patterns and habits that we all carry with us. This includes falling into a pattern of competition and individualism at the expense of acknowledging our interdependence with one another and our environment. This is where the personal is really the political, and David has really taught me this. It is quite simple really: If we acknowledge the interdependence between the personal and political and remain curious and imaginative, we can take some steps toward positive change, not just for institutions or curatorial practices, but for our lives as well.

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