



Contemporary Art  
Museum St. Louis

## *Curatorial Convening of Small Non-Collecting Contemporary Art Institutions*

Hosted by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

September 30, October 28, December 9, 2021 and February 21, 2022

### Participants:

- **Wassan Al-Khudhairi**, Chief Curator, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis
- **Allison Glenn**, former Senior Curator and Director of Public Art at Contemporary Art Museum Houston (now co-Curator, Counterpublic 2023)
- **Dan Byers**, John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts
- **Miranda Lash**, Ellen Bruss Senior Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver
- **Courtenay Finn**, former Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (now Chief Curator, Orange County Museum of Art)

### Background:

Museums of the *kunsthalle* (non-collecting) tradition are vital components of the contemporary art world. Foregoing the stewardship of a permanent collection—instead developing exhibitions and robust programming showcasing new and innovative work—contemporary non-collecting institutions are at the forefront of actively writing art history. Many non-collecting institutions work with smaller budgets and staff than their collecting counterparts, but are expected to produce similarly ambitious exhibition programs and increase audience numbers. Alongside these demands, curators at non-collecting institutions must fundraise and write and implement exhibition management policy, all while balancing the rigorous research and writing central to exhibition curating. With heightened racial tensions and the emergence and rapid spread of coronavirus in 2020, curators have been further implored to consider and act upon their respective institutions' roles in the perpetuation of anti-Black racism while focusing on the safety of their staffs, audiences, and communities at large.

In response to these mounting pressures, **Wassan Al-Khudhairi**, Chief Curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, with the generous support of an **Emily Hall Tremain Foundation Peer Network Grant**, brought together a cohort of senior curators from similar sized non-collecting institutions including **Miranda Lash** (Museum of Contemporary Art Denver), **Dan Byers** (Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University), **Courtenay Finn** (formerly, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland), and **Allison Glenn** (formerly, Contemporary Art Museum Houston).

The cohort met via Zoom in September, October, and November 2021 to advance curatorial practice by learning from each other's successes and failures and identifying solutions to shared challenges. These discussions culminated in a half-day virtual conference in February 2022 featuring special guests **Diana Nawi**, independent curator, and **Sarah Williams**, co-founder and Executive Director of the Feminist Center for Creative Work. Centering empathy and equity throughout their conversations, the curators addressed the shifting nature of curatorial practice, working with publics, and internal institutional models and practices with the intention of sharing resources, showing support, and working more efficiently and effectively.

### **Discussion Summaries:**

The following are summaries of discussions held between the cohort, organized by topic.

#### ***The Shifting Nature of Curatorial Practice and Leadership***

Without the broader support of a large staff, the central focus of many curators at small non-collecting institutions has shifted from creative and intellectual enterprise to that of production and organization. While some larger institutions have designated staff for exhibition design, programming, and publications, oftentimes, curators at smaller institutions have to take up these responsibilities themselves. This is all compounded by a need to effectively lead and account for departmental staff and collective goals, leaving these curators with little time to consider their own scholarly interests. The cohort discussed various ways to balance these necessary responsibilities with their own scholarly endeavors and output.

- The pandemic forced institutions to slow down and reflect on the relationship between their intentions and the pace with which they work. In response, two of the participants reported their institutions reduced the number of exhibition seasons presented annually. Reducing the amount of exhibitions produced each year allowed more space and time for the development of thoughtful

curatorial research and more equitable and dynamic approaches to exhibition making. In doing so, they were able to set up new scaffoldings of care for their staff and the public manifesting in numerous ways: expanded installation periods in care of preparatory crews, expansive and inclusive programming balancing accessibility and rigor, and more.

- Another institution reported designated research days in which those with research-specific responsibilities were allowed to dedicate an entire day to that work.

Sarah Williams, the co-founder and Executive Director of the Feminist Center for Creative Work, spoke with the cohort about alternatives to nonprofit ways of working and leading a team. Countering the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of larger institutions, the FCCW utilizes consensus-based decision making processes to guide the internal affairs of their organization. Departmentally, the consensus process allows for autonomy and control over a group's own functions and outcomes while cultivating trust across the organization. In a moment where high attrition is seen industry wide, Williams stated the success of such a process is evidenced in staff retention and morale.

Resources:

- The Feminist Center for Creative Work  
<https://womenscenterforcreativework.com/>

### ***The Relationship Between Artists and Curators***

With quarantine restrictions, social distancing efforts, and an inability to travel, curators were faced with difficulties in developing and sustaining relationships with artists and opportunities for exposure and networking, found in the biennial and gallery representation systems, became fewer and farther between. As society comes to a “new normal” post-pandemic, the cohort considered various modes of engagement to help strengthen relationships between artists and curators and make up for lost time.

- In regard to deepening long-standing relationships, the group discussed the various contexts for which an artist has shown at their respective institution. Questions such as “What is the artist’s relationship to your institution? Have they been included in exhibition programming in the past? If the artist has a history at your respective institution, how can things be done differently?” gave way to suggestions of program development and expanding artistic practices to incorporate the public. These considerations not only serve to renew long-standing relationships, but to provide new opportunities for

growth within an artist's own practice, thus centering them at the heart of curatorial practice.

### ***Artist-Centered Financial Practices***

As institutions touting themselves as artist-centered, it is imperative that contemporary arts museums equitably compensate their exhibiting artists for the labor leading up to, during, and after the organization of an exhibition. The cohort discussed various possibilities and potentials for artist compensation that encompass the entirety of exhibition-related labor within the constraints of their limited budgets.

- W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) Certification was discussed as a possible avenue for standardizing artist compensation in an equitable way. W.A.G.E. is a New York-based activist organization founded in 2008 with a mission to “establish sustainable economic relationships between artists and the institutions that contract [their] labor, and to introduce mechanisms for self-regulation into the art field that collectively bring about a more equitable distribution of its economy.” If an institution is not W.A.G.E. Certified, or the percentages may not be tenable for one's institution, W.A.G.E.'s fee calculator could serve as an informative model to structure artist compensation with institution-specific denominations based on one's own budget and values. Understanding that art practices and projects are interdisciplinary, institutions might think about places where fees can be advised along intersecting lines with projects, programs, and other stipulations (e.g. solo, group, commissions, workshops, performances, etc.).
- Another possibility discussed was making payments to artists in two parts, accounting for the production leading up to the exhibition and the exhibition itself. This idea came about during the pandemic when many artists had already prepared and spent time producing exhibitions that were eventually not realized.
- Noting delays in processing check and ACH payments through a finance office, the group discussed ways to incorporate more direct payment systems into their structure to ensure artists are paid in a timely manner.? Apps such as Venmo and Cash App, providing immediate access to funds, could help provide a framework for empathy and care in financial practices that considers the urgency with which some artists may need their funds.
- Transparent communication between artists and institutions from the outset of a project, commission, or exhibition is integral to the success of these

relationships. The group agreed that discussions about expectations, time, and pay for artists cements mutual trust and respect.

Resources:

- Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) Certification  
<https://wageforwork.com/certification#top>

### *Working with Publics*

Today, it is widely agreed upon that museums can no longer be neutral spaces and should function as agents of change within their communities. The murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 necessitated commitments of change and action from arts institutions across the nation. In response, many museums published statements recognizing their own complicity and complacency within an anti-Black racist America, promising to do better.

What does “doing better” mean? How can curators go beyond institutional statements to center marginalized communities in their exhibitions? With insight from curators invested in the intersection of art and publics, such as Diana Nawi, the co-Artistic Director of Prospect.5, the cohort discussed equitably working with publics and the role of institutions and biennials in the communities they reside.

- Museums hold a place of immense privilege and power in their communities, many times precluding them from truly understanding their relationship to their relevant publics. Being an active part of the community is integral to understanding how the institution can best be a partner to the community. This takes a lot of personal relationship building: being a face at different organizations, paying attention to local artistic production, and more.
- Personal relationships and intersectional coalition building amongst community stakeholders builds power and prioritizes the public. Through building such relationships and power among the community, curators should come to understand the needs of their community, centering them in their exhibitions and community engagement initiatives. Advisory committees and listening tours take curators beyond the largely internal process of drafting diversity, equity, access, and inclusion and land acknowledgement statements and move institutions directly into their communities, ensuring the institution is never the single arbiter in its community-centered decision making. These committees should contain voices of people whose authority commands attention: artists, families, community leaders, academics, and more. However, no voice should be prioritized if it is antithetical to the community’s needs and interests. Trusting the community more than the institution is central.

- Communities of color have historically been subjected to cultural extraction. When initially approaching these relationships, it is important for curators to temporarily cede their own curatorial vision in favor of understanding what the culturally specific needs of the community are. In doing so, one may be more attuned to the serendipitous moments where a community's needs intersect with scholarly interests. It is at these intersections that museums can empower their communities while continuing their work as active innovators in the art world.

Resources:

- *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, curated by Allison Glenn at the Speed Art Museum <https://www.promisewitnessremembrance.org/>
- *Yesterday we said tomorrow*, curated by Artistic Directors Naima J. Keith and Diana Nawi for the fifth Prospect New Orleans <https://www.prospectneworleans.org/>

***Land Acknowledgements***

With the increasing state violence experienced by Black and Indigenous communities in recent years, cultural institutions have been implored to reckon with their implications in the legacies of colonialism and white supremacy. In an effort to address these histories, a common response from institutions has been drafting solidarity statements and land acknowledgements. Upon the publication of such statements, many institutions have been criticized for what is seen as a passive and performative action. Considering this, the contemporary curatorial peer network discussed the purpose and process behind writing land acknowledgements and the work that follows.

- The foundational work consists of research concerning the histories and legacies of Indigenous peoples, settler colonialism, and white supremacy in an institution's respective location. Focus this research within your neighborhood, its surrounding communities, and the city at large.
- With land encompassing a multitude of collective histories, it is important to consider what and how voices are prioritized and addressed as well as what it means for a cultural institution to take on culturally-specific work.
- This work necessitates intention and introspection. Ask the following questions: Why should your institution do this? What needs to be communicated? What other work can be done?

Citing the processes behind various institutions, three common methodologies for drafting land acknowledgements were discussed. These processes are not mutually exclusive and can be addressed in conjunction with each other:

- Utilizing the land acknowledgements of community partners as models (e.g. municipalities, other institutions, businesses, and more). Thinking about their process, the language used, and how it exists in community conversation and action today.
- Creating an advisory committee to draft an acknowledgement along parameters set between the committee and institution.
- Working directly with tribal communities and Indigenous artists in the development of the statement with an understanding of the expansive time and multitude voices involved in this process.

There is criticism of land acknowledgements as passive and performative, signifying that the “work is done.” How can a non-collecting institution consider the land acknowledgement as the starting point for lifelong work within the institution? What other work can be done in reparation to Indigenous communities?

- The verbal acknowledgement against the statement being an “end all, be all” is vital. It forces accountability and signals a long-term intent. Self-conscious consideration of the parallels and contrasting qualities of acknowledgements, reparation, and demonstrative actions are integral to understanding the various manifestations of long-term institutional work.
- Contemporary institutions and their curators work through socio-political questions and grapple with issues of our time through the development and execution of exhibitions. Histories and legacies of indigeneity can be incorporated into exhibitions and community programming to build upon the work of which land acknowledgment is often the first step. The weight and emphasis of an institution’s curatorial statement, exhibition program, and didactics should be considered for varying impacts on relationships with Indigenous artists and communities.
- Commissioning Indigenous artists to engage in the process of creating land acknowledgements as well as long term initiatives supports artistic development and sows the seeds for relationship building.

Resources:

- Robinson, D., Hill, K. J. C., Ruffo, A. G., Couture, S., & Ravensbergen, L. C. *Rethinking the practice and performance of Indigenous Land*

*Acknowledgement.* Canadian Theatre Review. (February 9, 2019)

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/716610/pdf>

- *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts*, curated by Candice Hopkins and Dylan Robinson at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery  
<https://kwag.ca/content/soundings-exhibition-five-parts>

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