

OPINION
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Why Institutions Now

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Rare is the insight that arrives without serious self-reflection. In the world of art museums, milestone anniversaries are often occasion for critical evaluation of the institution's mission and future endeavors. In 2013, [the](#)

[Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania \(ICA\)](#) in Philadelphia celebrated its 50th anniversary with a six-month long exhibition that drew inspiration from its past as a springboard for a slew of newly commissioned works, programs, screenings, performances, and installations that underscored the institution's commitment to artists in the present.

Yet, after the exhibition, a few burning questions remained. What, exactly, did the “institute” in the ICA’s name signify across its history and how could it be reimagined going forward? How did it set itself apart from other non-collecting contemporary arts organisation or similarly-scaled kunsthallen? Our investigation began with an earnest look into the ICA’s archives: we pored over previous mission statements and searched databases in the University of Pennsylvania archives. Very quickly, we recognized the need to expand our questions and look outward beyond our own walls. What potentials might an “institute,” focused on contemporary art within the context of a major research university and open to the public, hold today? What was the function and the future of the institution? Who plays a role in shaping it?

I is for Institute

Over the last few years, our project, [I is for Institute](#), has evolved into a global, collaborative network based on a simple premise: far from being undefinable monoliths, cultural institutions are shaped by people—the workers who perform labour within them, the artists whose work is on display, and the publics who walk through the doors. How might we highlight the dynamic nature of contemporary arts organizations, defined in the broadest sense of the term? What would it take to both identify the problems within institutions and chart possible solutions for creating better institutions—institutions that could meet the changing demands of the publics and artists they serve *and* the needs of the people who work within them?

We wanted to highlight *who* and *what* shapes the infrastructure of the cultural sphere and lend transparency to how institutions function, given that so much of the internal dynamics of cultural organisations is opaque to the public. Amid calls to increase both transparency of funding and planning, as well as diversity, accessibility, and inclusion within institutional infrastructure, it felt important to confront the hegemony of cultural organisations by honing in on our capacity to create actual dialogues between people and help facilitate genuine collaboration. Furthermore, as we reflected on the possibilities for change within our own organisation, we wanted to underscore that contemporary arts organisations can take myriad forms. It is our belief that in order to reimagine what a museum can be, we must reflect critically on the power structures and ethos of organisations as they relate to their local contexts and to broader ecologies.



Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist, 2019, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photo: Bruno Lopes.

Since opportunities are rare for cultural workers to speak candidly about both the day-to-day realities and stakes of their work, we began talking directly with our colleagues in the field, highlighting these conversations on our digital platform. We began by speaking with those within our immediate network—folks with whom we had previously collaborated, friends, former colleagues. However, the pool of interlocutors grew exponentially, spanning a range of individuals scattered across the globe who represented an equally diverse range of institutions, big and small, with

histories long and short. The individuals and groups we spoke with were generous and enthusiastic, offering insights into their local contexts, providing new frameworks and perspectives on both the field and the idea of "the institution" itself.

These intensive discussions demonstrated that, while our individual circumstances varied, the global nature of the contemporary cultural field meant that we necessarily shared a great deal of common ground. We recognised that we can learn from one another and share our resources. With two of our thinking partners, RAW Material Company in Dakar, and the Kunsthalle Lissabon in Lisbon, we embarked on long-term projects involving months of research, travel, resource sharing, and public-facing presentations. Outcomes are still ongoing, stemming from real relationships that we have worked to sustain over several years of dialogue. Such relationships reflect the spirit of *I is for Institute*, which is rooted in an ethics of collegiality and collaboration rather than competition, and an openness to new ways of learning and unlearning.



Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist, 2019, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photo: Bruno Lopes.

Particular moments in time

As we bear witness to the ruptures brought about by the current global pandemic, both within our field and outside of it, it is essential to remind ourselves of these ethics. Institutions are standard bearers that hold, and withhold, histories, but they are also dynamic agents that shape the stories we tell. With *I is for Institute*, we have always been cognisant that our record is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but rather reflects particular moments in time

that may lend insight to the larger mechanics within the cultural field. Institutions are dynamic, ever-changing entities. In the short time that we've been engaged in *I is for Institute*, much of what is on the record has changed—from people to institutional names, to the nature of institutional positions. It remains more urgent than ever to critically examine what institutions can and should do, and for whom they do it.

Our intention has always been to present the multiplicity that defines the nature of cultural institutions: the different ways of organising and framing questions, the many models for approaching work, culture, and society. In each phase of our research and collaborations, we asked ourselves: Who will be interested in what we find? Institutional histories bear relevance not just to those within the cultural sphere, but those interested in how culture pervades aspects of everyday life in general. We hope that the questions we have posed to our collaborators, and the range of responses we've received, might offer pathways for those outside the field, as well as those within it. We hope to stimulate educators, students, and those who might want to break free of any existing models and create something entirely new. In the face of so many foreclosed opportunities within the cultural sphere, we aspire to provide a sense of possibility, and perhaps even optimism, for what we can all do and be in the future.

On 9 November 2020, I is for Institute published an interview with Vilma Jurkute, Executive Director of Alserkal, on their website. Find the interview [here](#).

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