

I is for Institute: Conversation with Phillip March Jones and Paul M. Brown, Institute 193

Tausif Noor

Phillip March Jones is the founder and Curator at Large of Institute 193 and runs an exhibition space for Institute 193 in New York City. Paul M. Brown is Director of Institute 193 in Lexington, Kentucky.

TAUSIF NOOR

Can you tell me about each of your roles at Institute 193 and how it was founded?

PHILLIP MARCH JONES

I am the founder and have been involved since the beginning. Institute 193 was founded in 2009 in Lexington, Kentucky to provide artists from Kentucky and the Southeastern United States with exhibition and publication opportunities.

PAUL M. BROWN

I've been Director for about two years and have been with the organization for about three. We'll turn ten in October.

TN

One of the things that we are trying to do with this project is to get a wide range of perspectives from institutions across the country. Admittedly, because I'm from the Northeast, I don't have as great of a knowledge of the South as I'd like. I would love to hear a little bit about Lexington, and the decision to found the institution there.

PMJ

Lexington is a city squarely in the middle of Kentucky. In relation to the region of the southern United States, it is north of south or south of north, depending on how you look at it. There are about 325,000 people living here, a fairly centralized downtown that is surrounded by horse farms for the most part, but also some other agricultural industry. We make a lot of bourbon and tobacco.

Institute 193 was founded in Lexington essentially because not only was I from there, but also because there were artists, writers, musicians, and other people making work, and had indeed been creating works for a very long time, who weren't being exhibited, published, studied, or engaged with in any way. In places like New York or L.A. things tend to be overmined and artists can get a show right out of college or an MFA program. But in Lexington, there had been people who had been making work for decades without the benefit of any real formal presentation. Institute 193 was founded in a way to rebrand, or re-engage things that already existed, and then export them to the rest of the world.

TN

That's fantastic. Paul, can you tell me a little bit about your involvement with the organization?

PMB

I came on initially as Development Director. Normally, we're a one-employee operation, but the director at the time, Maïa Ferrari, was here on a one-year contract and we knew that she had a definite end date for when she'd stop working for us. I arrived about six months before she was scheduled to leave to work under her and get my bearings, and then came on as the full director when she left that fall.

TN

Can you tell me about the physical locations of Institute 193?

PMB

Our first gallery space was established here in downtown Lexington. It's pretty small, about a 400 square feet. In September of last year, we opened a project space in New York's East Village that serves as a satellite space for the projects that we do.

TN

Is there a mission statement or purpose for the institute?

PMB

Yes. Our mission is to promote and preserve the cultural contributions from the contemporary American South. In the early years of the organization, we were really focused on exhibiting artists in Lexington who had not had opportunities to show, and now we are expanding our focus to regional concerns in the South pretty broadly.

TN

It's such a rich area in terms of thinking about all the artists that I love. Tiona Nekkia McClodden, who lives in Philadelphia, is from Arkansas.

PMB

Yes!

TN

And with that in mind, it's important to note that the South, or what I and perhaps other non-Southerners might call "the South," isn't so cut and dry. I'd love to hear about how the two of you think about that term, and what it means for you.

PMJ

I'm not really dogmatic about what is or is not the South, but I think for our purposes, it's roughly from Kentucky down all the way to the eastern region of Texas, then back around to the Carolinas, and then a little bit of northern Florida. But really, it's anybody who has a specific or direct relationship to the region. Maybe you grew up in Alabama, and then you went to college in Georgia, but you just happened to live in New York now—that doesn't necessarily mean that we are not going to engage or work with you. I think the South is whatever—within reason—you think it is. I don't think that we view it as a fixed position on a map.

PMB

I think a lot of people have preconceptions about the kinds of people who live in those regions, and I think a lot of the work that we are doing, to a degree, is trying to broaden people's understanding of not only the people, but the work that comes from here. If you look at our archives, our program

encompasses a wide range of art-making. We show a lot of self-taught work, which is maybe most closely associated with the region, but we might be putting that work next to work by someone with an MFA. We might also show an artist who has a self-taught practice, but whose work doesn't look like it came from someone with a typical Southern vernacular. I think one of our strengths is that we don't necessarily see the importance of making those distinctions between various groups of artists.

TN

You've anticipated my next question, which is whether, after considering the artists you've worked with over the years, there is a kind of artist you'd identify as a typical Institute 193 artist?

PMJ

I think the only thing that really unites all the artists that we've shown is that they are very serious about what they do. We don't show Sunday painters who are doing things as a hobby. We show people who are dedicated to whatever their visions happen to be. It's funny—we released a compendium called Institute 193: Volume One, and there was a review about Institute 193 that talked about us as a space primarily devoted to the work of self-taught or outsider artists. I haven't done the count lately, but at the time, roughly 20-30% of the artists we worked with might have been defined as such. I think what's really radical about what we do is that we do not fall victim to those kinds of stereotypes or categories that exist within the art world—whether or not you have an education, or you are disabled, or you are of a certain race, color, sexuality, etc. We show good work, serious work, by people who are engaged with serious ideas. You might be blind and deaf, or you might be from a rural part of Alabama, or you might have an MFA. It doesn't matter. I think that's a very hard thing for people to grasp, because people really want to categorize things: "This is black art. This is white art. This is queer art. This is—," whatever. We work with Artists with a capital A.

TN

Can we talk a little bit about the name? How did you come up with "Institute 193"?

PMJ

From the beginning, the idea was not to create a commercial gallery, but to create something based on ideas and education and engagement and publication. So, "institute" really felt like the most appropriate nomenclature for that series of activities. 193 was just the physical location—the number on the door—but we had this idea from the beginning, and it still very much functions that way. We create something—whether it be an exhibition, a publication, a record, or any kind of project at or within the boundaries of our space—that then radiates outward, and our name suggests a process where things are conceived at a particular place but radiate out into the world. The structure within which you operate determines ultimately what motivates you: what you do and how you do it. The idea of an institute has a fundamental orientation toward scholarship and certain kinds of engagement.

TN

That's definitely part of what motivated us in doing I is for Institute as well—how institutional or operating structures inform the function of art making and exhibiting. Going back to some of the more basic details about Institute 193, do you charge admission?

PMJ

We do not.

TN

How are your visiting hours structured?

PMB

Our space here in Lexington is open four days a week, so on Wednesday—Saturday, from 11am to 6pm. Our New York space is open Saturday and Sunday, 12 to 6pm.

TN

Great. Can tell me more about where you're located in Lexington? Are you in the middle of city?

PMB

Yes, it's pretty much the middle of the city, in between two universities. If you go south of us, you are on University of Kentucky's campus, and if you go north, you are on Transylvania University's campus. Between those two sites is really the core of downtown Lexington, and we are right in the middle of that. We're basically on one of the primary thoroughfares through the city, so we get a lot of foot traffic and a lot of car traffic.

TN

Now that you also have the second space, how are you thinking about how you program the two spaces? Do the exhibitions relate at all?

PMB

They are pretty different. When Phillip and I were talking about opening New York's space, we conceived of it, at least for the first couple of years that it's in existence—, as a portal into other parts of the South. Most of the shows that we have put on there since its opening last year have been partnerships with other institutions.

PMJ

The idea for the New York space is very simple, in that curators generally have a little bit of your northeastern myopia that you were talking about earlier. Curators don't really travel outside of major metropolitan areas here in the States, for whatever reason, and especially not to places like Kentucky or the southern United States. So, we decided that we would just bring the projects to them. Our first collaboration was with Columbus State University, and then we did a project with Creative Growth Art Center. Our current show is with Atlanta Contemporary. The idea was that every show would be in collaboration with a different institution, where they can present a body of work, an artist, or whatever they are doing to get more eyes on it—particular kinds of eyes.

Our first show is a great example of this. We showed Eddie Owens Martin, also known as St. EOM, an artist from rural Georgia. His work now belongs to Columbus State University. We organized the exhibition, and we invited curators from different institutions to come see it—the MoMA, the Drawing Center, the Smithsonian. And they came to see it. As a result, a MoMA curator put his work in a show that's now on view at the Drawing Center. St. EOM was a guy whose work took years to take off—I mean they couldn't get anyone to really engage with the work from New York. But when we brought it to New York, it was seen and accepted. And now he's currently on the wall at the Drawing Center. It also led to some strategic gifts to different institutions. We gave works to four museums as a result of that project and helped to place those. The space is just a few hundred square feet, but because of its location in the East Village, people are willing to engage with it in a different way.

TN

Right. This leads me to ask how you think about your audience, and whether that's the same thing as your community. In thinking about the way you're bringing work to curators and new audiences with the New York space, I'm wondering how you think about different publics.

PMB

Our audience here in Lexington is very much the same as the community that we are in. The people who come to everything are a lot of the artists that we have shown in the past, a lot of their peers, and a lot of people who are in various other creative scenes around town. Interestingly, as we have grown, and our footprint has grown, I think that a large part of our audience is actually built online. Because Lexington is not the most convenient place to visit, a lot of people who are familiar with our program are really engaging with the work that we are putting out on our Instagram, our Facebook, and our mailing list. I think it becomes pretty expansive in that way, and the New York space is linked to that as well. We're really expanding our audience by setting down a footprint there. What has your experience been up there, Phil?

PMJ

With our audience, there are the local, or regional, people who come from Louisville or other cities to see what we are doing, and then obviously the people who are immediately in Lexington. But I have never viewed that as the end-all-and-be-all. The concerts, the exhibitions and events are specifically geared toward engaging those people, but I have always looked at our audience as being the world, and not in a grandiose way, but just in a matter-of-fact way. You can do whatever you want, but if it never gets beyond central Kentucky, that's not really so great. We were founded with the idea that we would do things that would begin here in Lexington and then reverberate out into the cosmos. The New York space is a very specific and tangible way of bringing things out of the region and into the spheres of different curators, individuals, collectors, and others.

Through our specific initiatives, including the website, our records, and especially our publications, our work reaches way outside of this community. We've done dozens of publications of various levels, from zines, small booklets, staple-bound things to major publications, like Walks to the Paradise Garden, in collaboration with the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. We've worked with Wendell Berry and Guy Mendes—the first book we did with them is called Guy Mendes, 40/40: 40 Years, 40 Portraits. Books are a really easy way to have our ideas travel, so from the beginning, we've been doing a lot of books.

PMB

Something that we haven't touched on yet is that we have a pretty robust program of exhibitions and events that happen outside of our two gallery spaces. For example, through this weekend, we have an exhibition on view, connected to a book that we just published, at the High Museum of Art called Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads. It pairs the High Museum's self-taught collection with the photographs of Guy Mendes and Roger Manley.

TN

That collaborative spirit seems to be built into your organization from the beginning. In terms of structure, is it just the two of you who work as Institute 193 right now, or are there other employees?

PMJ

We have a part-time gallery manager in New York, Maria Owen, who's there at the gallery on the weekends. There's a lot of hustle.

TN

I think it's incredible how you've managed to do so much in a relatively short period of time. In terms of the structure of your program, do you have discrete seasons? How many shows do you do in a calendar year?

PMJ

Too many.

PMB

We haven't run the space in New York for a full calendar year yet, so we are not totally sure, but if things go as they are, it will be 12 exhibitions between our two physical spaces in Lexington and New York. I would estimate, and Phillip maybe you can provide more insight, that offsite exhibitions add between six and ten exhibitions to our calendar. Does that sound right?

PMJ

Yes, basically every year we do between six and ten shows in any given space that we run. We will end up doing 20 to 25 shows this year, probably. Right now, we have five shows on view in three cities. At the High Museum, we have the exhibition Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads. In New York, we have a show by Bruce Burris at Shrine Gallery and Sargent's Daughters. We have our own Kevin Cole show in the New York Institute 193 space, and Emily Ludwig Shaffer's solo at the Lexington space. And what's the other one?

PMB

Atlanta Contemporary.

PMJ

Where we have the Kambel Smith collaboration.

TN

That's a lot! But it sounds like you have a really strong network of people who collaborate with you, and with whom you have a strong connection. Who would you consider your institutional peers?

PMJ

In some ways, though we are a lot smaller, we are not so different from White Columns. We're different in some fundamental ways, but we're not so different in the pace or the level of engagement. We happen to be a non-profit and so we operate in that sphere. But I see some of these galleries across the southern United States, particularly ones with ambitious program, as our peers as well, whether that's Tops Gallery in Members, or Tif Sigrids and Ridley Howard in Athens, Georgia, or Atlanta Contemporary.

TN

It seems like you seem to scale.

PMJ

We tend to be expansive rather than reductive, so we are always looking for ways to unite or points of intersection as opposed to why we are different. I think that's really the way that we conceive of things.

TN

Right. You mentioned that you are a non-profit. How does funding work at Institute 193?

PMB

We are primarily funded by individuals. We have probably a peer group of a couple hundred people who give us funding every year, usually on a pretty small scale. I would say 99% of our donors give us

below \$200 dollars annually. In recent history, we have been able to secure some larger grant funds, like the Andy Warhol Foundation grant. We also have access to city and state grants, and funding from small grantmaking organizations like JustFundKY, which funds queer programming in various sectors across the state. We also raise money from selling our publications, things like that.

TN

Do you rent the buildings that you are housed in?

PMB

Yes.

TN

In terms of how you think about your program, do you do mostly solo presentations or group shows? How do you think about the program, and how do you decide who to work with, and who to show?

PMB

Like we were saying earlier, we have an artist roster that really runs the gamut. We have provided artists with their first show on several occasions. We exhibited Shara Hughes and Eddie Martin, and other artists who had shown for 20 or 30 years before they came to us. It's really all over the place. In terms of how we put together the program, I can say for the Lexington space, when I'm looking at the calendar year, I really try to build a roster that is representative of that same ethos, where we have artists at all points of their careers. We have artists who are hopefully reflecting on what the region looks like, on all axes and intersections. The New York space operates a little differently, since we are parTNERing with institutions rather than individual artists.

PMJ

With that said, almost all of our exhibitions are solo shows, except for offsite shows. Quite frankly, there's just not a lot of space. You can't do a group show. Maybe people can try, but with 400 square feet, a group show usually isn't very successful.

TN

How do you manage to get all of your publications completed between everything else that you're doing? Do you have to hire outside editors?

PMJ

We just work all the time!

TN

Seriously!

PMJ

A book just came out today that we single-handedly put into action. We have some designers and people we work with, but we're really doing all this stuff, and not because we're getting rich. We're doing it because there's a real need for it.

TN

How do you think about the contemporary? What does that word mean for you?

PMB

We do consider ourselves a contemporary institution, but we are pretty expansive in how we define

the contemporary. To go back to what we were talking about earlier, I think that a lot of the self-taught practitioners we've shown are having similar conversations about what the contemporary means in their own work as folks who have MFAs, and we try to be inclusive in bringing together those conversations.

PMJ

Yes—we're showing people who are making art about life here. For me, there's a really basic notion of art that people tend to forget in a world where money is changing hands at auction houses or between members of museum boards. There's an idea of art where at its essential core, the artist is engaging with ideas and the world around them, expressing some fundamental need or notion. Those are the kinds of artist that we are looking for. That's our compass, or that was my compass initially, and I think the nice thing about the various directors of Institute 193 over the past ten years is that they all bring their own interests and particular ideas to the forefront. And Paul has really excelled at that, and brought a whole bunch of different artists that I would've never had any knowledge of, just because they are a bit out of my immediate sphere of interest or knowledge base, really.

TN

How many shows have there been?

PMB

In total?

TN

Yes.

PMB

I think we are at about 65, maybe a few more.

PMJ

I think it's probably a few more if you count offsite exhibitions.

TN

And how many directors have there been?

PMJ

There have been five total: I was the Director for the first three years, and then there was a guy named Samuel Chase Martin. After that was Cat Wentworth. Maïa Ferrari was here for one year, and then Paul.

TN

Over the past ten years, Phil, what have you seen change in the organization since you started? Was there anything you weren't expecting?

PMJ

Well, I never intended for the thing to survive. I say that sort of as a joke, but you start something, and you don't have any notion of whether or not it'll work out. At the time when I started, I had about \$600 dollars in my bank account. I was installing internet in rural Kentucky, essentially to make enough money to do the thing. I rented the space, and took it from there. I didn't have any idea that it'd be around ten years later, which is obviously an eternity in this kind of exercise.

I'm just joyfully surprised that it still exists, and that other people are interested, and that people like Cat, Paul, and Chase, who have dedicated multiple years of their lives to the organization, have brought their own ideas and contacts and interests to it. I think it's all grown into something that is way bigger than myself, and I'm very happy about that.

TN

We've been asking founders especially whether they think the institution needs them to exist. Could Institute 193 exist independently of you?

PMJ

I have been trying to work myself out of a job this whole time. Quite frankly, I don't have founder's syndrome, where you want to do everything and control everything. I wouldn't mind, at some point, just kind of stepping away from it, leaving it in somebody else's hands. Now Paul runs all of the programming, and all of the books out of Kentucky, and I'm doing this stuff in New York. We collaborate on other things, but I think my current role is mostly a function of some financial, practical issues right now. I think if we were able to raise enough money, then I would gladly step away. And I'm really viewing that as my next role, to answer your question. I don't think it can survive without me now, just because I'm the one who can bring in certain amounts of money, but if I can make a big push and bring it in, then I would gladly step away.

PMB

I think one of the primary things that Phillip brings to the table is that he has worked in this field for much longer than any of the other directors that we have had. I'm the oldest director that we have ever had at Institute 193, and I'm 28. So, most of the people who come here are young, and I think really the benefit of being here is to have the experience of working with Phillip and his contacts.

TN

One question that we ask is what are some of your challenges and frustrations that you have, but also what are you really excited about? What motivates you? What are you looking forward to?

PMJ

The challenges are the challenges that every organization faces, which are monetary, and which for me, are a lot less interesting to talk about. But I think that the things to look forward to, or things to be excited about, are enormous. The potential to take any of these kinds of artists—their stories, their works—and to take it out and share with the world in a really sophisticated and engaging way. That's the reason I get up in the morning. And I would guess Paul is increasingly defining his life in that way, and that the relationships he's built with artists and different people are seeping into his own life. It's everything to be excited about. Everything else—like the money and everything—are just the boring parts you have to deal with.

PMB

I totally agree. I think the interesting thing about working at the scale that we do is that pretty much all the artists we end up working with are also our peers. Also, because there are only two of us, there is no real separation between the decision-making body and the people who are picking up the work from these artists or helping them install—that's all the same person. The most rewarding part of this job for me is building those relationships and being able to work really closely with artists.

PMJ

And I think that's important to talk about actually, because scale is a really, really interesting problem

or opportunity. When anybody writes about 193—it's almost comical—they always say, "The small but influential... The tiny but mighty..." or whatever tagline. The truth is, we've never had a lot of financial resources, from the beginning or even now, but we had all the desire in the world to do things, so we just did them at the appropriate scale that we could in terms of square footage, etc. But we did them well at that scale. I think a show in 250 square feet in the East Village can have just as much impact as a show at a major institution, provided that it's done well and presented elegantly. And I think that's in everybody—everybody wants to think about how this thing can grow, but I have never even thought about getting a bigger space. We have these really beautiful, lone jewel boxes in New York and in Lexington. We're doing shows with major institutions, and we have 650 square feet of rent we have to pay.

TN

That's definitely something that we think about as well—is the institution the building, or is it what we do? Is it the program? Is it the artists? Is it the exhibition? Is it the publications?

PMJ

Well, if it's the building, you should quit. Because it's that old Christian adage, right? "The church is not the building. The church is the people." I'm not a really a preacher or anything, but that always made a lot of sense to me.