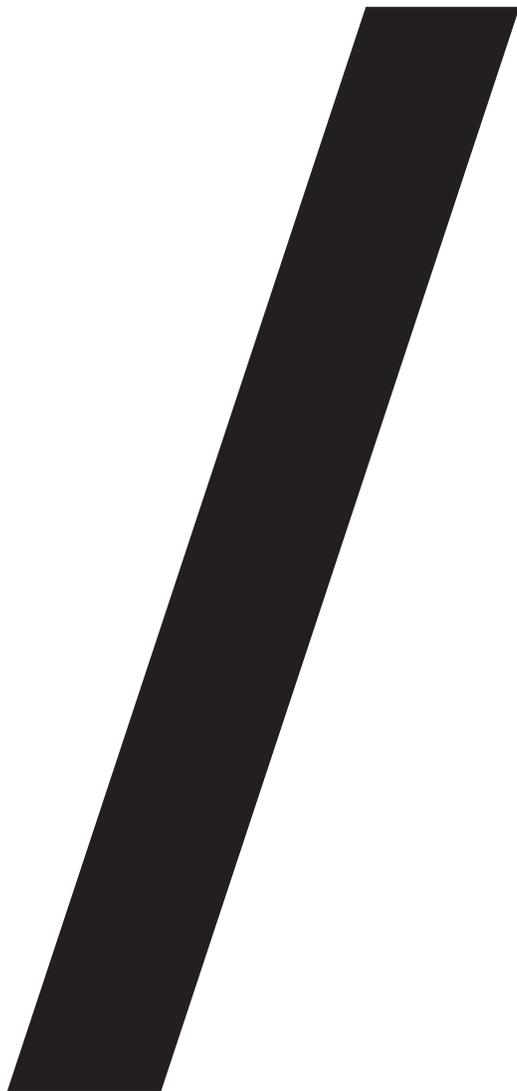


ECI //
Interviews //
Series 1

Michael Khuth
// Lumi Tan



**Emerging
Curators
Institute**

**Interviews
// Series 1**



Introduction // Acknowledgments

The Emerging Curators Institute (ECI) supports emerging curators from diverse backgrounds through an in-depth research, professional development, and presentation program.

The first of its kind in the region, the program aims to foster critical dialogue around curatorial practice and provide opportunities for Minnesota-based emerging curators. As part of its program, each year ECI offers support in the form of funded educational fellowships to four emerging curators from the area.

For the ECI Interview Series, each of the fellows selects a curator to interview whose practice they want to investigate further. This collection of interviews was conducted by the 2020-21 cohort of fellows in 2021.

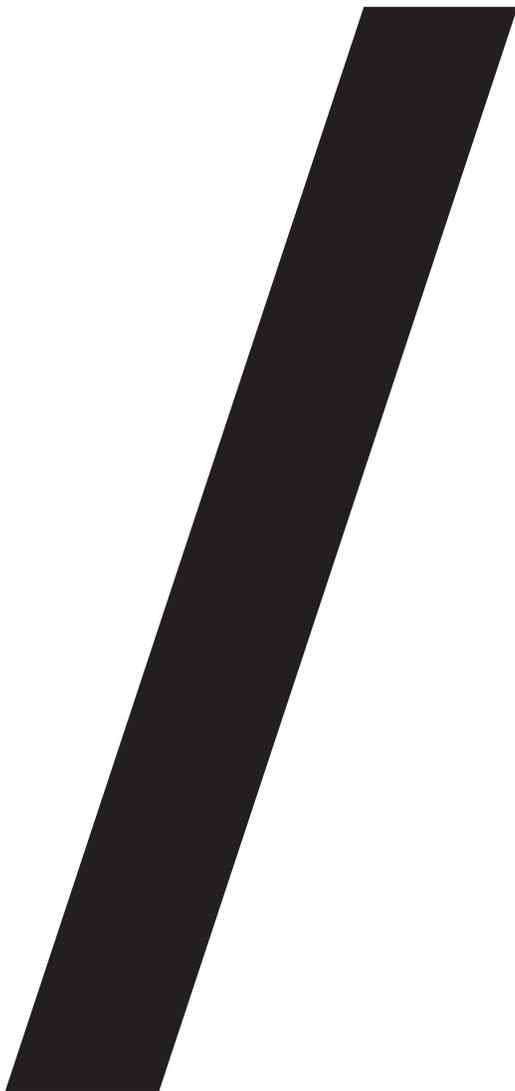
ECI extends its warmest thanks to Lumi Tan and the rest of the interviewees for their time and insights.

Michael
Khuth



Lumi
Tan

Meriem Bennani, installation view of *Siham & Hafida*, 2017.
Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of The Kitchen.



Michael Khuth (he/they) is a queer, Khmer-American lens-based artist and curator from Rochester, Minnesota. Working within photography and collage, they seek to form a visual language to further celebrate and acknowledge queer histories—oscillating between personal, familial, and communal experiences. Khuth is the founder and curator of *Generation Magazine*—an arts and culture publication that seeks to amplify the voices of Cambodian artists to collectively reimagine their possible futures in contemporary art. Khuth holds a BA in Media and Cultural Studies from Macalester College. Since graduating, they are thankful to have been awarded grants, fellowships, and a residency from the Chautauqua School of Art, the Thomas J. Watson Foundation, the Southeast Asian Diaspora Project, the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council, and the Emerging Curators Institute.

Lumi Tan (she/her) is Senior Curator at The Kitchen in New York, where she has organized exhibitions and produced performances with artists across disciplines and generations since 2010. Most recently, Tan has worked with Kevin Beasley, Lex Brown, Jibade-Khalil Huffman, Baseera Khan, Autumn Knight, and Kenneth Tam. Prior to The Kitchen, Tan was Guest Curator at the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Nord Pas-de-Calais in France, director at Zach Feuer Gallery, and curatorial assistant at MoMA/P.S.1. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Mousse*, *Cura*, and numerous exhibition catalogues. She was the recipient of 2020 VIA Art Fund Curatorial Fellowship.

MK If you were to describe your practice to someone who isn't super familiar with your work, how would you summarize what you do and why you do it?

LT I would say that I work with both emerging and established artists from all generations and disciplines to create exhibitions and performances that generally—but not always—challenge dominant narratives around identity or representation. I do this because I really believe in the ability of art to change perception, and that institutions can do this responsibly, in the service of artists, instead of towards the institution's own self-image.

MK Describe a "Lumi" exhibition in three words.

LT I always think about this because there's definitely a stereotype surrounding my exhibitions, but I would say "visceral". But I've also had to lean into the fact that they have become "lush" because I haven't been working much with minimal installations. As for the third word, I'm not so sure.

MK I think a word that encompasses a level of surprise.

LT Yeah let's go with that! My ideal exhibition draws people in on an aesthetic or sensorial

level, but leaves them with a critical shift in perception.

MK Reflecting on my own experience as a Khmer artist/curator, I often don't see a lot of Southeast Asian folks in art spaces—in the U.S. at least. I find that this results in many Southeast Asian communities having misconceptions about career paths in the arts. As a Vietnamese curator who has found success in the art world, how do you articulate the work you do when you go back home?

LT I have always felt that I've been a big mystery to my family. My mom deeply cares about all cultures in a general way—she loves music, dance, film, literature and going to museums. She was very supportive in that way, but outside of that relationship very few people in my family understood why I wanted to work in art or with artists.

When I was first starting out, I remember talking about doing a studio visit for the first time and my uncle was like, "Why would you want to do that? Why would you want to spend time in an artists' studio just talking to them?" And it is hard to explain that "just talking" is at the root of what I do. And I completely understand the issues around that. Like the levels of access that everyone has to art, or what

is seen as “art” within museums or galleries. It is totally an inscrutable system. It still is. There is no regulation to it. No rhyme or reason to it. So it is hard to explain a world and a type of practice that is very insular and incredibly exclusive most of the time.

I’ve tried at least to bring my immediate family in as much as possible about why I care about art and curating. I’m not sure if that has traveled very far, but I remember being at a museum with my dad—who is a very politically and socially conservative person. We were at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and he asked me about a particularly opaque Joseph Beuys installation, and I gave him my best explanation. Later on, I heard him talking to another family member about how much more interesting it was to go to an art museum with me. After that moment I learned that just being there alongside him made a huge difference and I feel good about that.

MK That’s sweet. I’m realizing that people often just need an entry point into artwork sometimes. I think that curators can either create entry points for viewers in the certain choices they make while curating an exhibition (didactics, historical contexts, language, catalog essays, etc.) or can become an entry point themselves.

LT Exactly.

MK There’s also this idea that growing up in a town or city where the art scene is small or where art isn’t seen as valuable stunts your growth. Although that holds true to a certain extent, I also strongly believe that growing up in that kind of space can teach and remind you how to advocate for what you care for and get really good at it.

LT Absolutely. Just having so many different audiences to talk to is deeply important. If you only know how to communicate in one specific way, it’s not helpful. That can become the default for many curators who either don’t have to interact with the public that much, or grew up in a certain type of academic/privileged environment where all that background knowledge is a given.

MK Thinking about the characteristics of a good curator, I was wondering when you realized you had a knack for curating. Curators often have to wear many different hats simultaneously with various responsibilities. When was your “aha!” moment where you realized this was the type of work you wanted to do?

LT That’s a good question. No one has ever asked me that before! I still have those days where



Baseera Khan, *By Faith*, 2020.
Photo by Ariana Sarwari. Courtesy of The Kitchen.

I'm like, "I'm not a very good curator." I studied art history in college and I had a very specific idea of what a curator was—which was someone based in research and art history. When I came to New York after college and started working at PS1, it was my first experience working with artists who were within a 10 year age range of me. By working with artists that I felt like were my peers, I better understood that curating was about *relationships*.

Yes, it's about doing the research and the more behind the scenes work, but it's so much more about making sure artists feel supported and comfortable, and problem solving—constant problem solving. I don't think there was a day at PS1 where I wasn't in crisis. I discovered that I was good at dealing with those crises. Some people get so caught up in the drama of these problems that they can't see any way to move through them and get stuck. Being a good curator has to do with being fluid. It has to do with taking a step back and being able to tell yourself, "Okay, here are all these people I have to work with to solve this problem or to make this happen."

MK Where would you say that ability to think on your feet and embrace being "fluid" in your work comes from?

LT It's not something I understood until I got older. Looking back on my teenage years, my early professional life, and everything I did in between, I was always asking myself, "What is an experience I haven't had?" or "What is something I know nothing about?" I had this mentality of throwing myself into situations where I was doing something for the first time and didn't know anyone. That's not to say that I never totally failed, but I managed to see the humor even in the darkest moments. I wouldn't say that I consciously did that, but I do think that some of that energy came from having lived in the suburbs and feeling bored. I was always like, "There is something else out there." There was always this other *thing* that I was looking for. I was restless. I've come to realize that I can get through difficult situations while understanding I've learned a lot on the other side. Despite a lot of social anxiety I had growing up, I don't have a lot of fear—I have no idea where that came from!

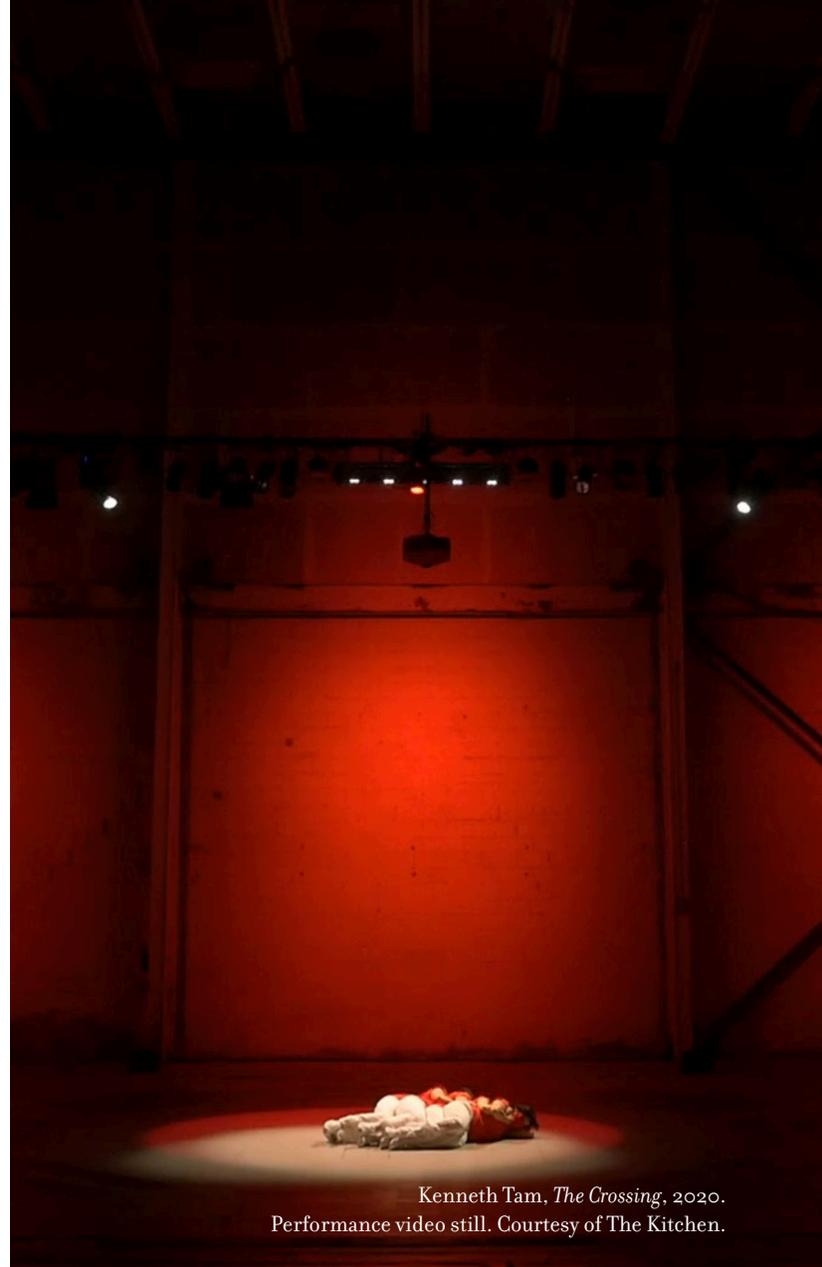
MK It's inspiring to hear about you being so ambitious and leaning into feeling uncomfortable and failure as the very things to eventually propel you forward. It's clearly working. Backtracking to what you were saying earlier in terms of engaging with artists, one of the many things I've learned at the Emerging Curators Institute is that the word curate comes

from the word “curatus” or “curae” which essentially means to care. What does caring for artists look like and mean to you?

LT I thought a lot about this through the years and how that original meaning was referring to caring for *objects*. Through my work at the Kitchen and working with performance practices, I began to understand that I was working with *people*. At the Kitchen I was impacted by the experience of working all day with people on something. I was in space with the artists 12 hours a day for rehearsals and saw them sleep on our couches, cook in our kitchens, and bring their children and dogs to the space. They essentially did all these things they felt comfortable doing within this structure we had created for them.

MK You’ve mentioned in several public talks that the Kitchen is a space that values failure and experimentation among artists. What are the things you believe help encourage that experimentation?

LT That has a lot to do with the last question you asked about care. It is really about creating a supportive environment that distinguishes itself from “art world” norms, and understanding where other institutions’ values lie and which of those values you can



Kenneth Tam, *The Crossing*, 2020.
Performance video still. Courtesy of The Kitchen.

sort of strip away. So things like the legibility of a project as seen through marketing and branding, the emphasis on product over process, attendance numbers; those kinds of metrics of success in an institution should be redefined, or maybe just thrown out. Because every artist has a completely different idea of what success is.

We don't care if an artist doesn't get any press for their show or a bad review. We don't see that as a reflection of the value of their work. We understand every project as something they needed to do in the trajectory of their career, or else they wouldn't have done it. For me, it's understanding what we can offer as an institution—"Here's what the Kitchen does really well, and this is what we can support you in doing." Those are all things I put first in a conversation with an artist, and I can then have a lot of trust in them that they've had deep consideration of these conditions. That is what results in a project that is specific to the space, and also pushes their practice in different directions.

MK Keeping in mind your previous jobs at PS1, Zach Feuer Gallery and the FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, where you were primarily working with visual art, how has curating purely visual works impacted your approach to curating

performances at the Kitchen?

LT It's rare that a certain type of performer works with a curator, ones who aren't regularly performing within museums. Many of these artists have been rehearsing their pieces off-site for a year and they have their own ways of communicating with their cast. As a curator, you're entering when all these other kinds of structures are already in place. In those cases, it's about forging a relationship with the institution and making it feel like a welcoming space in which performing artists can find a home.

These artists are constantly touring, and it's very rare for them to feel like they have a home base. It's important for me to be reassuring by simply being like, "Hey, if you want to do this thing a little differently than you've been doing it at every theater all over the world then you know that's okay with us." We're not here to make money off of box office, and we're not here to get a Broadway producer to come, even though that does happen. These are things that they can feel pressured about at other theaters, and as a curator you're able to get past those conversations right away and hopefully get to talk about the work in a new way.

This isn't your typical curatorial work in an

exhibition sense, but it's as simple as just being the one person at an institution who is focused solely on their project and is able to attend to them in a more supportive way. People have told me, "Whenever I'm at another theater I wish there was a curator, a Lumi, or a very human person that I'm working with rather than feeling like I'm just the next slot in the season."

MK I imagine that the live audience plays a vital role in lending meaning and directly responding to performance work. How do you and the Kitchen actively ensure that the audiences that are seeing the work are coming from all walks of life?

LT This is a huge problem in New York. The city is incredibly diverse, but the majority of people who feel like they can attend performances—and that can vary from performance art to theater to experimental dance—may not be rich, but they are definitely white. It becomes an even more visible issue when institutions suddenly have this push for diversity in programming so that everyone you see on stage is black or a person of color, but the audience is white.

At the Kitchen specifically, our audiences are interesting because we don't have one

audience—we have a visual arts, dance, and music audience, and different audiences even within disciplines. Our biggest problem has been bringing them together. We have an audience who has been with us since literally day one in 1971, and those who have never been to the Kitchen before. And that new audience is one that needs to expand constantly—we can't just rely on the fact that the artists we show are very diverse and that results in bringing in a more diverse audience. We can't ignore the fact that we are an incredibly white institution. There's a lot of work to do within ourselves to make every audience feel as comfortable as we can.

MK When is curating frustrating for you?

LT All the time. It's frustrating when you feel that what you do can't make a difference within bigger structural issues of the art world—which is basically every day! I think that's the biggest reason curators—or any art worker—leaves the field, it's because you feel like you're trying to do the best you can and you're doing work you believe in, but ultimately it's not making any systemic change.

MK When is curating most fulfilling for you?

LT I mean, that's all the time too! That's the

balance. It's when you feel like you've truly given an artist an opportunity they never had before. I feel pretty lucky in that I am able to do that with most projects that I work on.

MK What is a piece of advice that has stuck with you over the years?

LT I don't know who gave me this advice, but someone somewhere down the line told me to never discount anyone. We are all in this crazy art world—whatever that means to each person—for the long run. People change, and they're going to be in your life for a long time. You should never judge someone for who they are in a given moment. I don't think you should ever dismiss someone because you don't think they're a good artist, or not important to your personal trajectory. Never make those assumptions because people can change drastically within 10 years.

MK What advice would you pass down to someone trying to delve into curatorial work?

LT If you're not seeing the spaces that you want to work in or the communities you want to be a part of, start it yourself. The art world is not at all forward-looking. It is reliant on younger generations or people outside of it to fuel them with ideas. I'm always trying to rethink that power structure of who is assumed to

have influence and who doesn't. Institutions are dinosaurs, and without new blood they're not going to survive. And it's up to the next generation of curators to decide whether or not they want to give it to them, or find another way to do the work they believe in!



Staff, Mentors, Fellows, Partners

The Emerging Curators Institute is run through a co-leadership model involving the participation of Daniel Atkinson, Esther Callahan, Sally Frater, and Jehra Patrick.

Mentors to the fellows for the 2020-21 cohort are Tricia Heuring, Tim Peterson, Casey Riley, and Michelle Westmark Wingard.

Fellows of the 2020-21 cohort are Kehayr Brown-Ransaw, Starasea Nidiala Camara, Juleana Enright, and Michael Khuth.

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