



EPISODE 76  
**BAHIA RAMOS**

**MAX ANDERSON**

Welcome to Art Scoping, I'm your host Max Anderson. *ARTnews* had a story this week about the acquisition of Sam Gilliam's 1968 canvas *Double Merge* jointly by the Dia Art Foundation and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The reporter, Claire Selvin noted that the earliest major joint purchase in recent times was Bill Viola's room-sized 2001 *Five Angels for the Millennium*, jointly acquired in 2002 by the Whitney, Tate, and the Centre Pompidou and kindly credited me with initiating it.

While I did wrangle a complex legal agreement bridging British and American common law and French civil law, it took Tate's Nick Serota and the Pompidou's Alfred Pacquement to sign onto an unorthodox arrangement. Fast forward almost 20 years and the competitive mindset of museum directors remains largely intact despite welcome exceptions like this one.

Owning carbon-based art remains a proof of value and virtue, but there are signs that a younger audience is gaining interest in non-carbon-based fleeting, time limited, screen-based, or immersive experience. Floor to ceiling projections of details of paintings by Van Gogh entice visitors looking for entertainment as do mirror rooms. While small static oils may be judged to be necessary but insufficient. In tandem with what may be a generational shift, the proportion of artists relying on yield in media of canvas and metal versus projected, performative, or evanescent art experiences is unknown.

So a question poses itself, are audiences and more and more artists drifting away from carbon to alternative platforms including NFTs, leaving museums and the conventional art market behind? The pace of this change is dizzying so it's a bit early to know. Let's turn now to a leading voice in philanthropy and more familiar ground.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

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**MAX ANDERSON**

That was Bahia Ramos, director of arts at the Wallace Foundation. Since 2018 she has led the team responsible for the strategy and implementation of the foundation's work in areas including building audiences for the arts and promoting arts education for young people. Before arriving at Wallace, Bahia served as program director of the arts for the Knight Foundation where she led the organizations strategy for a \$35 million annual investment in arts funding across the country.

In that role she built national partnerships and initiatives with organizations such as ArtPlace and Sundance and worked on the local level to bring more high-quality arts experiences to diverse audiences and neighborhoods. Previously at Knight she has served as director of community foundations managing a \$140 million investment in community foundations in 26 cities, supporting local civic innovation and community vibrancy. She's guiding the Wallace Foundation's new \$53 million initiative focused on arts organizations of color.

A native of Brooklyn, Bahia lived in London for two years consulting with the Man Group PLC in its corporate responsibility department. She's also worked as director of government and community affairs for both the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

She received her undergraduate degree in history from Williams College and a Master of Public Administration from Baruch College's Marxe School of Public & International Affairs where she was a member of the Pi Alpha Alpha Honors Society and a National Urban Fellow. Bahia welcome to the podcast.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Thanks Max, great to be here.

**MAX ANDERSON**

You're not only a foundation executive, which we're going to get into, but you're an art collector and you have said that buying art is a way of supporting artists as well as finding works that speak to you. Are you active as a collector today?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yes, though I seem to be running out of space for collecting right now and I've tried to slow down. The thing with art is that when you love it, you always want it and while I've probably slowed down since I moved

back to New York, it's been really important to me to support the work of artists and try to find other vehicles to support the making of art, rather than just putting it on my wall. But I will confess that I did buy a couple of pieces this year during COVID to break my own rule.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Yeah and I guess it's a different impulse. So many people think about buying art as something purely for themselves and if they happen to meet the artist, fine. But that's not your philosophy it sounds like.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah, I think for me it is important to be in conversations with artists and really learn about how things were made, the impetus behind them, their meaning. But I really love for the work I have, to be in conversation with itself. And I really seek to have a personal relationship to what I own. I was saying over this weekend, I can't imagine giving up anything that I own, although moments of what will my legacy be? What will happen to my art after I'm gone, does occur and I think about where art goes after someone departs the world.

**MAX ANDERSON**

You grew up in Brooklyn and what was your experience of the visual arts as you were growing up?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

I would say going to museums a lot with my mother, with my grandmother. I think it was important to understand – like be part of the cultural life of the city while I was growing up. And then also that art – all the art making that just happened in the streets. My mom was very much the, “Oh there's someone on the street selling their art, can we take a look at it and talk to them for a while? If I like it, maybe I want to – you don't know this person could be the next Basquiat, Bahia.”

So if there's a lot of seeking and thinking about how art lives out in the open and that art doesn't always exist in a gallery or in a refined space; it could exist in the public domain, so to speak. And that's really been a part of how I lived my life culturally. What happens in these really wonderful and beautiful and these anchor spaces that we talk about and support? But then also what happens in the cultural life of a city and where do you see art? Do you see art on the side of a building? Do you see art being sold on the street?

Do you see art happening as people are walking through the intersections of a busy street? And so it's really, really been a part of how I live my life here and absorb culture in New York.

**MAX ANDERSON**

That's in New York, you had a decade in Miami, how do you think Brooklyn changed as a home for artists during that time?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

My collecting really exploded while living in Miami because you had just greater access to artists and the gallery scene and being able to buy art. And it became – it demystified the – you had to be a person of means and many resources in order to be part of the art world. You could be a person with some amount of curiosity and interest and you could find ways, especially in Miami at that time in 2010, to go to the fairs and negotiate and get art and meet artists, meet them in their studios and make that a practice.

And I think it's that confidence that I came back with to New York and discovered that it's still quite hard here, but I think the – what I'm delighted by is kind of like how galleries have become so much more of a public conversation for New York now. And I just see more interest from people who might not be of the art world, go and talking about going to galleries, and seeing shows and learning about new artists, because the art feels like it's reflective of the time that we're going through.

So while I feel some barriers exist, I feel like the curiosity and the will, the willingness of people to just go out and experience these things and take advantage of that access, has increased over time.

**MAX ANDERSON**

The things you've been collecting of late, were they made during the pandemic?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

One was made during the pandemic, was just a limited-edition print. And what's interesting it's – you wouldn't know, I don't see that reflected in the work necessarily and – but I'm curious to see what happens in a year or so and what happens as we begin to emerge from this collective sense of grief that we're all experiencing.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Bahia, you've long been in leadership roles in foundations, which is a role spearheading investment and arts funding. And how has the pandemic affected the way you think about funding priorities?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah, well I think for Wallace there was a huge shift to be quickly responsive to the needs of our grantees, both our organizational grantees and then thinking beyond about the larger arts sector and community overall. So I was proud that we were able to contribute to

emergency funding for our most recent initiative group of grantees that we'd been in relationship with for the last five years.

And while our programmatic investment had ended, we were able to turn around monies to them to try to shore up some comfort during COVID. And then we also looked locally to being a part of New York and a part of this infrastructure and ecosystem. And we put resources into the New York City COVID-19 relief fund.

But then we also, from what I love about Wallace is we're thinking about the research and tools and practices that people are trying to understand and make better during this time. So along with COVID relief and the artists relief fund and money to our grantees, we also helped develop webinars on how to understand the virus from an epidemiologist's perspective to preparedness strategies to scenario planning documents for the arts sector.

And open up resources for people to convene and network beyond the work that they were already doing to make sure that these peer-to-peer connections and opportunities for art administrators were there during a time of deep isolation. And that people could understand that they weren't navigating through this by themselves, but there was a whole community of folks going through the same thing and seeking connection and resources and understanding.

And I think that really cemented, for me, the ways in which philanthropy can galvanize and move itself quickly to respond to the needs of the community in a very short time.

## **MAX ANDERSON**

And I gather that the new five-year \$53 million investment Wallace is making is part of a commitment to learning and making long-term relationships with grantees. What are the kinds of outcomes you're hoping for from this investment?

## **BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah, so we're always thinking about how our efforts build equitable improvements in the arts, understanding that the arts belong to everyone. And what we learned most recently is that leaders of arts organizations of color have steadily been saying that their contributions are often overlooked and underfunded.

And for Wallace, all of our initiatives are grounded in central guiding questions that if we have the potential to answer that question, how

might it help organizations and the field at large? And this question of what community means and how it is leveraged. How that connection to community is leveraged by arts organizations of color to increase their resilience while sustaining their relevance was one that became very clear during this time when everyone has shut down.

And all organizations are thinking about what they mean to the people, where they are, and who are those people, and what are their needs, and what is the responsibility of the organization to meet those needs. And so this initiative especially will have a strong research focus that examines this relationship between the relationship to community and relevance and resilience.

And we'll be supporting organizations – arts organizations of color to document their efforts and insights around that work and also the aspirational work of what it means to be embedded in community and have that be a part of your DNA. And hope that those learnings and insights will help support other arts organizations of color and the broader field.

And I think what we really want to build is recognition and understanding of the distinctive contributions that arts organizations of color bring to our landscape and to the field at large. And we hope that our efforts will build the evidence-based, the knowledge landscape around arts organizations of color and their practices.

## **MAX ANDERSON**

One of the issues, of course is sustainability and the fact that nonprofits have exploded over the last many years to the point where many aren't really sustainable. They had an idea at the beginning, and they went forward. And you've divided the grants, I believe, into two pots for larger and for smaller organizations. Is there a time at which you evaluate organizations that are meretricious but may be aren't going to survive and then what happens?

## **BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah it's a great question. There will be two cohorts, there is this smaller cohort; we are designed because of the deep research focus in our work to work with a smaller number of larger organizations at a time. But we knew it was imperative to find a way to work with smaller organizations almost concurrently because that is who the majority of the field is.

And so I think we're going to look at this question and co-create the program with our grantees and work together on understanding which

elements they want to probe and examine further. But we will also have, after a year of planning around these questions, a way to opt out, for an organization to say, “You know what, I thought I wanted to do this, this is not what I want to do. Can I please – I think my time here has finished. Or this is taking an approach that I don’t want to take.”

And I think having that kind of flexibility is key. I think that the studies and reports that we produce from this will try to spark new thinking. And I think it comes with the full understanding that not everybody will survive and I think that’s a risk that all of us are taking right now in investing in new spaces and bringing on new challenges.

Because that is the reality with which – in which we all exist and there are no guarantees anymore. And so I think to the best way that we can help the field evolve and bring new practices up that help answer questions that folks might not have the resources to really tackle on their own, I think we’re just better positioned for that.

#### **MAX ANDERSON**

When nonprofits start, there’s always an assumption they will be a forever entity. And companies don’t look at the world that way, they recognize unless they’re demonstrating value, they’re not necessarily going to make it. Restaurants for example, we see certainly in New York open and close with regularity. But in the nonprofit world it’s almost a religious fervor that people feel, I’ve got to keep this thing moving. And I think the question for foundations and others is, would it be better to have things merged or would it be better to have talent pools consider different routes? When you evaluate, do you look at that as a learned lesson that perhaps we need to be taking into consideration?

#### **BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah I think so, but I think – for us I think the research doesn’t look at it from a “were you successful at doing this or not; if not, oh then we all failed.” I think we really look at things from a continuous improvement and continuous learning perspective. And if these things don’t succeed, there is learning in that too. And how does that help inform others who are trying to do the same? And so for us, it’s really important and I think it’s a little different relative to other foundations that this emphasis on continuous learning and improvement are all part of the learning journey.

And we’re not in this space to evaluate whether someone said they were going to do X and they did exactly X at the end means that it was a success. I think the success is in the journey of saying you’re going to do X and getting to whatever outcome that might look like X or might not

look like X in the end has done. And that's – I think that's where we stand on things.

## **MAX ANDERSON**

It's been an evolution Bahia, because foundations including Wallace seem to be loosening expectations around key performance indicators and other business school-like metrics, which was very common starting in the nineties when making grants. And we at Souls Grown Deep recently had generous grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and MacKenzie Scott and they were explicit. We don't want you to give us reports, you're the experts, roll ahead. What do you attribute that change to and how does it work at Wallace?

## **BAHIA RAMOS**

Well I think for us it comes from a place of humility, right, we don't know what we don't know. And we really learn from the field. And in order to really learn from the field, you have to enter with humility and trust and say, "OK, I'm looking to you, field, to inform this question and help move this learning along." And so that's one thing. I think another is that the context is – it's constantly shifting especially in a sector like the arts and you can't always hold someone to something that they say, "Oh, yeah this is going to ..."

I will look at COVID, it's like yeah we're going to up our audience by 75% next year and then all of a sudden, a pandemic hits and you're trying to stick to that metric in order to meet a goal and the ground has opened up underneath you. And I just think it's unfair to put someone in that position and apply that kind of pressure to someone. I think understanding, like I said, what is the learning in here?

And how can we learn from these incidents, these mishaps, these paths that go in a different direction? And really document it in a way that's honest and is practical for the field, does a greater service than saying, "Well we wanted all these folks to get 75% and they didn't and so there you go, story over."

## **MAX ANDERSON**

There's been a backlash, I guess, of late by particularly people in museum staff about the nature of philanthropy, the nature of philanthropic giving and the fact that a lot of sources coming to support the arts are drawn from people who earned their wealth through their ancestors or parents earned their wealth in ways that aren't commensurate with today's values. What are the ways in which you guard against concern that people have that money coming from foundations is by definition impure?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Right, I think this in perpetuity of where did the money come from and how was that wealth earned are all valid things and questions. I think we think about our own processes, and I think we – I think philanthropy as a whole has begun to interrogate our respect of processees to question whether we're perpetuating some of the same inequalities that we may have, others in our place may have built long ago.

And really trying to undo some of the harm. And I think what we know is building trust is at the center of our work and with that trust comes deep listening and an ability to respond, an ability to be humble with your acts of service. And how we are, kind of humble and effective stewards within this space.

And so I think everything is up for grabs in terms of the kinds of conversations. And I think foundations, even during this period, we've come together more openly, more honestly to say, what are the ways in which we can help work together in these spaces where there might be mutual interest and not complicate things for organizations any longer? But understand and build transparency, more transparency into our systems so that the invitation is clear and our intentions are clear and they're more in keeping with who we are supposed to be in this society versus the kind of black box scenario in which everything seems dark and nobody even knows how to approach us.

And that was a big move in doing an open call for this initiative of moving from an invitation only process to having an open call and saying, well we don't actually know what the landscape looks like. And there might be a lot of unusual suspects out there that we'd love to connect with and learn about. And it did wonders for us.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Yeah it's been for me a wonderful learning curve around impact investing, because although our resources at the Souls Grown Deep Foundation are very modest, our board agreed that it was time to just start with a fresh sheet of paper and say, every investment we make has to be commensurate with our values. We have to stop just using index funds, we have to move towards that. Is that in the foundation community – I know some foundations have explicitly embraced that, is that broadly among your peers, a topic?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yes. Values, yes, values aligning with the work, absolutely. And it's something that the board holds us accountable to and it's something, I

think, people working for foundations today really want to have. We want to know is this work aligned with even my personal values and with the values we espouse to have as a foundation? And I think that we give a lot of attention and care to making sure that our work is reflective of the values and that we live out our values in how we present ourselves and interact with the field.

**MAX ANDERSON**

For me it goes to the core of even where the funds that you have are invested. And we've been working with NACP, we've been working with a variety of ways of using funds and capital that are mission related. And I guess that's, for me, what's fascinating about the shifting ground under us is accountability and transparency are now really not just watch words, but they're being lived by people. I wanted to ask you about governmental and corporate art support in the sense that it's been waning over the last many years and putting more pressure on funders like you. But it's also prompted arts organizations to try to emulate for profit ventures. And I'm wondering if you agree with me that that's a risky path that can end up devaluing a commitment to art as a practice separate from a commercial context?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah it can, but I'm seeing now that new arts leaders don't really want the traditional nonprofit arts structure to govern the way they create and present and make. And so they're opting out and building collectives and building new business models around the practice of art. And so I think this period obviously has given a lot of space for reinvention and pivoting.

And it could be very risky, but at the same time, the cover of fiscal sponsorship seems to provide some stability to folks. And I'm noticing that foundations are starting to say, "Well, hey how do I work with these new structures? What are the ways in which I can work with fiscally sponsored organizations? And I don't need to be strict about having 501c3 status because –"

**MAX ANDERSON**

So these are – I'm sorry to interrupt but these are like b corporations you're speaking of or how are you – what are these –

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Oh, I'd say private foundations working with artist collectives or things that don't fit that traditional structure. Foundations are trying to learn about what those new structures are and saying, "Well, how can I invest in a way that works for me compliance-wise, but also works for – allows my resources to be connected to these projects?" And we're shifting and

changing along with them and trying to see where the spaces in which people are taking risk.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Fascinating because across the pond in Europe, of course a lot of cultural organizations and collectives are looking at the United States saying, “We should be more privatized, and we should be more ...” And I don’t know that they’ve got a really good solution because they still have strong ministerial support from –

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah strong subsidy from government –

**MAX ANDERSON**

Like with Mexico and so many other countries around the world where it’s assumed that culture is a national priority. We don’t have that here and certainly not in arts education.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah.

**MAX ANDERSON**

How would you say arts education is as a priority in the Biden administration? What have you seen as the early signs?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Early signs. I would say early signs are positive in that there are conversations around how the arts fits into the whole child’s learning agenda. Just as an aside about government, it was really public funding that saved a lot of arts organizations through the pandemic or in the pandemic as we are right now.

And I think that surprised a lot of folks that these – like the save our venues and the PPP loans really came through at a moment when people needed government to step up. And I do think that we are trying to understand how arts fits into the fabric of our society, arts and culture beyond saying, “Oh the museum is here and here’s our economic impact study, we made 10 jobs and bought \$50,000 in supplies.”

But really thinking about what is – who is and what is the role of an artist as an employee, as a working person in America. What is the efficiency around arts organizations? Because despite what we say, arts organizations take their money, they present something, it goes to the public, it has value and they can turn that around pretty quickly. And so I think we’re trying to think about that conversation about government and governmental investment in culture more deeply.

But I don’t think the answer has been created yet.

**MAX ANDERSON**

And of course there's also the red state, blue state issue of where you put your money and the degree to which those organizations, in a way, are discounted in a state that doesn't look at the arts the way other states do. Is there a plan ahead past this remarkable \$53 million investment for what comes next that you could share with us or are you still figuring that out?

**BAHIA RAMOS**

I think we're still figuring that out; we invest in spaces for five years at a time and we recently had our urban call, we got 252 responses to that, and we haven't even launched the first cohort and the second, I think will come in the next couple of years. And so right now we're focused on who the selection of the grantees for the first cohort of the work and maybe if you ask me again in about three years, I might have a more solid answer. But –

**MAX ANDERSON**

I love the time horizon of foundations like this, so different from the way the rest of us work.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

I know well what I love – the thing that I think I really appreciate is that we as well are in this space for the next five years, that is it, right. And it's not a flash in the pan for us, this is a deep commitment, this is the long term, this is how we are going to develop relationships and trust in this space. And I'm really excited about the possibility of learning about all the organizations that come through this initiative or not.

And being able to contribute to that conversation over the long term, so for now, that's where my head is.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Well it'll be great to watch the impact. And as you say, you're going to share the findings that you make in respect to the impact of these grants –

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yes, absolutely, I think that's part and parcel of our work is and I think it will be at a speed at which the field moves, so we have learned to really surface learnings early, get folks involved in the process of learning alongside us. And try to document as much as we can going through the thing, as well as once it's done so that we don't disappear and then reappear in six years with findings. So I'm hoping to be in constant conversation with the field as we begin this work.

**MAX ANDERSON**

Bahia, thank you for making time to be on Art Scoping, I really appreciate it.

**BAHIA RAMOS**

Yeah I appreciated my time with you, it was a great conversation, Max.

**MAX ANDERSON**

We've been speaking today with Bahia Ramos, director of arts at the Wallace Foundation, until next time this is Max Anderson of Art Scoping.