

On never taking no for an answer



An interview with The Shed's Tamara McCaw & Emma Enderby

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2255 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Curation](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Adversity](#).

The two of you are responsible for developing Open Call, which is a program offered by The Shed aimed at providing support, space, and resources for artists who haven't had the opportunity to commission or create new work in NYC. Applying for things like seems like a good practice for young artists. Simply knowing how to apply for things is important.

Emma Enderby: Yes. You know, it is kind of asking a lot for people to do this application, to go through the process. We wanted the experience, if you are chosen for a commission, to be very meaningful. The way that we really structured it is that they're getting serious time, they're getting a lot of support from The Shed, they're getting a large commissioning fee to help it be a valuable process for them to go through.

If you look through what we're asking for in the application, it's kind of a lot. We're asking for very thought-out budgets for their proposal. We're asking them to put a lot of information together, to have a fully-developed vision, to get us references from at least two different people, to put together examples documenting previous work. So we're asking them to put together a lot of information because we wanted to help them really think through what they were proposing. It will hopefully not only help them to think carefully about their commission, but also think about their own creative practice and how to work within the parameters of that.

Tamara McCaw: It's great experience for artists to go through this process because not only do they need to do that for Open Call opportunities, but they'll need to do this over and over again when they're trying to submit for funding for their other projects. These are similar types of questions that are often asked of artists. I think the process of just submitting is good experience.

For any kind of artist, being able to really articulate what you do for other people is a super valuable skill, and something visual artists often struggle with.

Emma: It is. And it's important to really be able to think through the practicalities of a new project. We've offered some guidelines, but we're also really relying on our applicants to think very carefully and really think through their proposals—both from an artistic side and also from a practical side. As you were saying, I think it's a really important process for young practitioners to go through. It's a skill you develop.

This project also addresses something important—the increased difficulty of being a working artist in a city like New York. For most emerging artists, it's nearly impossible.

Tamara: That was incredibly important to us. It was part of how we conceived of the program, actually. I think part of it is being a civic institution and knowing that we're in New York and we've got the amazing privilege of being in this space. When thinking about the kinds of artists that we'd like to represent, we have to ask—*can they actually still afford to be here?* Even us just saying that we were going to limit the commissions to New York City was challenging because we know that sometimes people have to go a little further North or they have to go across the river in order to make work. So we were really cognizant of that. At some point institutions like ours just have to do something to try and address the issue. We kept asking ourselves how we could create meaningful opportunities for people that also align with our commissioning model.

One thing we don't always get to talk about very much is curation itself as a creative act. It takes a lot of work and imagination to launch and facilitate creative spaces and keep them alive. For both of you, how did you come to this kind of work and what do you think it is about your personality that makes you well suited for doing this kind of thing?

Tamara: I love that you just brought that up because one of the questions we just got from an applicant who was working on their application for Open Call discussed the idea that part of their project involved curating new work by other artists, which was something we had not originally thought about. It speaks to what you were saying about curation as creation.

Emma: This person is an artist and it's part of their practice to bring these different voices into a larger context. There's actually a longevity, a huge history, for the way that artists can be curators. Curators do often step into more of the artistic way of thinking about exhibition making or display, so there's always been this dance that happens between the two.

Tamara: I was at Brooklyn Academy of Music for 17 years before coming to work at The Shed. It was a great place in that so many things came through—whether it was art to cinema to live performances. So it's been amazing to be part of that scene. When I first came to Brooklyn, I was involved in the art scene of the late '90s. It felt like art was everywhere and everyone was curating and building community. I always felt strongly about creating space for voices and ideas that sometimes don't get the attention they deserve. I've seen where institutions sometimes fall short of that. So I think that's my path and my history and what drives me, wanting to create space for voices sometimes that get marginalized.

Emma: I started actually as a classicist, not really as an art historian. Rather than language, I eventually became more interested in thinking about how you can access history through objects. So I started becoming more of a social art historian, but thinking about the classical world. Eventually I became interested in contemporary art and curation by thinking about how I didn't want to just be looking at the past but instead be very much in the present and really making and helping and being a communicator and translator for artists in this moment in time. It's such a collaborative relationship between curator and living artist and that was something that I thrived on. I enjoy thinking about how you take that relationship and communicate it outward.

As curators and programmers, how do you reckon with the increased multi-disciplinary aspect of essentially everything? Technology has created such a fascinating moment for art, but I wonder how curators keep up with what that means.

Emma: Oh, definitely. It's an observation that we make here a lot. It's increasingly rare now that you find someone who's just a painter or only a sculptor. It's all become so deeply multi-disciplinary. It's fascinating.

Tamara: We also started this program that was sort of an after-school creative action civic engagement project that we really thought was going to be grounded in work like poetry and spoken word. Every teaching artist that we had ended up being some kind of multi-disciplinarian, like they're a poet *and* a movement based artist, a poet *and* a filmmaker. So it's like, "Oh this program is actually way more rich than we even initially envisioned it because that's just how people are practicing art right now."

Emma: The issue of new technologies is an interesting one because when anything new is introduced in culture it immediately starts being used within art. Sometimes it takes a while, and often those early iterations and early stages aren't completely successful; there's a lot of risk that goes with that. Perhaps they're not always the greatest works of art, because it's such early use of this material and you don't quite know yet how to use it. But it's still that risk and taking on that challenge that I think makes it interesting work to think about even if sometimes it fails. It is very challenging. But you have to approach it very openly, with an open heart and an open mind to think about how everyone is using these new forms.

As people who are engaging with emerging artists, people who are still early in their career and trying to get a footing and have their work shown, what advice do you have? Is it just about applying for every opportunity and trying to get your work in front of the eyes of as many people as possible?

Emma: I always say form a community. Form your own community. Once you are part a community with a set of friends or with other artists you can actually do a lot together. You can help present each other's work. You can suggest each other for things. When I do studio visits I always ask, "Who are you friends with? Who else are you interested in?" I always advise

artists to think about that as well.

Tamara: Yeah, find your people. I'm always amazed at so many artists that take control of their own representation like putting on their shows and sort of carrying each other.

Emma: Yes, you know, doing it in their houses and in their kitchens. Putting on their own shows.

Tamara: This is true for young critics as well, who are often supporting young artists through their own communities and their own social channels, whether it be creating their own platform via social media or on the internet. All of this stuff is hard. This is not easy work. I think one of the only ways you can do it is by being there for each other and finding some sort of community.

Emma: There's no simple answer or solution for how any of this works, but one has to keep working and believing in what you're doing.

Tamara: I know we've been focused on the artist's side of things, but it's also true for the larger art and cultural worlds too. So much of it is about fundraising. You cannot accept defeat. There is never a no. You can't really take in a no. Maybe sometimes you have to maybe accept a "not right now" or a "not yet" but it's never a no. I would advise that for all artists and art administrators, curators, programmers...

Emma: Everyone.

Tamara: Everyone. You cannot give up. And that's definitely something that everyone has to struggle with at certain points. You can't stop. You just keep going.

Tamara McCaw & Emma Enderby recommend:

We recommend that you [apply for Open Call](#), a program created to provide invaluable support, visibility, and recognition for NYC early-career artists any age over 18 working across all forms and media to create and present new work in our unique space, who have not yet had numerous opportunities for new work commissions in NYC.

Participation in Open Call is free; all artists/collectives selected will receive a commissioning fee of \$7,000 - \$15,000 to support the creation of their work. Open Call will occupy various spaces at The Shed throughout the year, including one of the galleries, the theater, and the outdoor plaza, allowing for artistic diversity in commissioned works. Open Call artists working in the theater and plaza space will follow each other within a presentation period; the gallery space will be presented as a group exhibition.

Emma Enderby recommends:

I eternally recommend [The Dispossessed](#) by [Ursula K. Le Guin](#), well really anything by Le Guin, but this book in particular because of its play on Utopia/Dystopia which I feel is relevant to our current times.

I've also read the lyrical essay [Bluers](#) by [Maggie Nelson](#) numerous times. It's a quick but intense read, full of universal notions of love and loss explored through the author's devotion to the color blue.

An exhibition currently on view that I would recommend is [Adrian Piper's retrospective at MoMA](#). It's a rare opportunity to see this vast body of work in one place and experience the depth of her dedication both to making and a social/political discourse.

Two artists I can engage endlessly with are [Hilma af Klint](#) and [Bill Traylor](#). I return to af Klint's paintings all the time--there is still so much to discover with her work and the mysteries of her life. Traylor was unbelievably gifted and observant--he always reminds me that great artworks can be simple, as long as they're vibrant, truthful, and capture the imagination.

Tamara McCaw recommends:

Sometimes a work shatters you. Colson Whitehead's [The Underground Railroad](#) pulled me in and broke me open. It's relentless and essential. Left me raw, exposed, angry, but also clear and grounded. Living in a society still wrestling with the history, trauma, and impact of slavery, I recommend that everyone read/re-read it.

I became a [Tidal](#) subscriber just so I could stream Prince. ["Adore"](#) is always on the playlist.

[AFROPUNK Festival](#)--the artists, the people, the love. Don't miss it this summer.

Summer's coming and for me that means relaxing at Brooklyn Bridge Park after shopping at Brooklyn Flea and swimming at the city's free public pools. My favorite is the olympic-size [Kosciuszko Pool in Red Stuy](#).

An eternal skeptic, I resisted it for years. Then when I needed it the most, I binged seven seasons of [Game of Thrones](#) in two weeks.

Name

Tamara McCaw & Emma Enderby

Vocation

Curators, Organizers, Civic Program Coordinators





Photo: The Shed/Getty Images