

Philadelphia Contemporary Announces New Leadership Organization with the Promotion of Key Staff

Contemporary arts organization embarks on new chapter with curators Yolanda Wisher and Rob Blackson as Co-Artistic Directors, J.J. El-Far as Managing Director



Rob Blackson, Courtesy of Philadelphia Contemporary; Yolanda Wisher, Courtesy of Naomieh Jovin; J.J. El-Far, Courtesy of John C Hawthorne.

(Philadelphia, PA — February 17, 2023) — Today, **Philadelphia Contemporary**—a contemporary arts organization connecting the people and places of Philadelphia through art and partnership—announces the appointment of **Yolanda Wisher** and **Rob Blackson** to the joint role of **Co-Artistic Directors**. Director of Advancement **J.J. El-Far** will become **Managing Director**.

Founded in 2016 by **Harry Philbrick**, the nomadic organization presents visual art, performance art, and spoken word across the city of Philadelphia. Following this transition, which will be effective as of March 1st, Philbrick will assume the role of Director Emeritus and Board Chair, from which position he will take a leading role in advancing the organization's long-term, strategic plans.

In response to shifts in the post-pandemic philanthropic landscape, the reorganization also includes the elimination of four positions. Returning to its original model of a smaller curatorial team will allow the organization to more fully collaborate with guest curators on larger projects as these opportunities present themselves. Those leaving the organization have been offered severance packages, along with assistance in finding new opportunities.

“Since its founding, Philadelphia Contemporary has remained steadfast in its mission to present new art to the people of Philadelphia and to forge new connections between communities across the city.

With their depth of experience and collaborative approach to leadership, I am confident that Yolanda, Rob, and J.J. will continue to embrace the breadth of what art can be and relish the freedom to experiment,” **said Philbrick.** “Our entire staff has contributed meaningfully to this purpose, and so it is with deep regret that we announce the elimination of positions. We are certain that by taking a sustainable and steady path, we will continue to support artists and bring their ideas to a wider audience.”

Wisher, who joined the organization in 2018 and most recently served as **Co-Director of Curatorial Programs & Curator of Spoken Word**, was the third Poet Laureate of Philadelphia from 2016 to 2017. The author of *Monk Eats an Afro* (Hanging Loose Press, 2014), a Pew and Cave Canem Fellow, and a Writer in Residence at Aspen Words and Hedgebrook, Wisner regularly performs a unique blend of poetry and song with her band The Afroeaters. Just this past December, she was awarded a Philadelphia’s Cultural Treasures Fellowship.

Blackson came on board in 2021 and, prior to this appointment, held the position of **Co-Director of Curatorial Programs & Curator of City-Wide Initiatives.** Before his time at Philadelphia Contemporary, he served as the founding director of Temple Contemporary—a research and public program initiative whose signature projects include Symphony for a Broken Orchestra, Funeral for a Home, and reForm (with Pepón Osorio and the Fairhill community). Blackson has also worked in the UK as curator of public programs at Nottingham Contemporary and as a curator at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle/Gateshead.

Among Wisner’s recent projects at Philadelphia Contemporary is the Healing Verse Poetry Line, which was originally launched in January 2021 by Philadelphia Poet Laureate and licensed clinical social worker Trapeta B. Mayson. The toll-free and 24/7 phone line offers callers an opportunity to hear a new and hopeful poem on a weekly basis. In 2023, she will work with writer, choreographer, and director Raja Feather Kelly on *The Re-Emancipation of Social Dance*, a participatory dance-theater performance celebrating the ways Black Philadelphians have choreographed freedom, community, and culture through social dance.

In 2022, Blackson spearheaded a community-oriented collaboration with artist Pepón Osorio. Called *Convalescence* and supported by a \$250,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project involves the creation of a public programming series that convenes a group of audiences personally affected by the inadequacies of the healthcare system.

El-Far, who also joined Philadelphia Contemporary in 2021, specializes in creative entrepreneurship at the intersection of arts, activism, and social justice. Prior to this, El-Far was the Director of Development at RADIKISMET and at Pig Iron Theatre Company. She co-founded the Harlem Arts Festival, which she led as Creative Director from 2010-2015, and chaired the Board of Directors from 2015-17. In her new role, she will focus on development, external relations, and building on Philadelphia Contemporary’s partnership model.

“We are thrilled to partner as co-artistic directors and look forward to strengthening Philadelphia Contemporary’s existing programmatic relationships, while also imagining new opportunities for the organization,” **said Wisner and Blackson in a joint statement.** “We are grateful to the artists who have entrusted their work in our care, and we are excited to continue connecting new audiences

throughout Philadelphia with unique experiences that inspire us, connect us, and deepen our humanity.”

“I am looking forward to working closely with Yolanda and Rob as we embark on this next chapter of Philadelphia Contemporary,” added **El-Far**. “They each bring enormous experience, creativity, and deep knowledge of the city to our unique artistic projects. It is a privilege to be able to support their shared artistic vision for Philadelphia Contemporary. I remain committed to developing our existing partnerships and programs, while remaining nimble as an organization, and responsive to opportunities with new community partners.”

More information about Philadelphia Contemporary’s commissions, presentations, events, and development initiatives will be announced soon at <https://www.philadelphiacontemporary.org>.

About Philadelphia Contemporary

Founded in 2016, Philadelphia Contemporary is a contemporary arts organization whose mission is to connect the people and places of Philadelphia through art and partnership. Currently nomadic, Philadelphia Contemporary presents visual art, performance art, and spoken word across the city with plans to construct a two-story floating gallery on the Delaware River.

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