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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"TO APPROACH THE OBJECT FROM OUTSIDE": JOSEPH KOERNER ON HISTORY, TRAUMA, AND WONDER

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Transcript

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Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves. In this episode, I speak with Joseph Koerner, Professor of Art History at Harvard University, who teaches and writes about the history of art from the late Middle Ages to the present day, with an emphasis on Northern Renaissance art. He discusses his early focus on literary studies, psychoanalysis, and romanticism, and how his curiosity about the traumatic core of history has formed his work. More specifically, Joseph describes how themes of fragility and besieging shaped his childhood. Finally, he delves into his 2019 documentary, *The Burning Child*, and describes his current book project that explores concepts of siege.

Joseph Koerner
Those days I really didn't think of myself as an art historian. I thought of myself as somebody who's using art as a way to generate a certain kind of writing that otherwise [could] not [be] generated.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for joining me today, Joseph. It's great having you here.

Joseph Koerner
Great to be here.

Caro Fowler
Usually, we warm up with questions about people's intellectual backgrounds, or intellectual history. I noticed that you started out as a research assistant at Yale for both Michael Cook, who's a specialist in Romantic literature and Caribbean literature, and also Peter Gay, who's also a specialist in Weimar culture and Freud. So, I'd love to hear about [whether] you still think about this, and the ways in which working with these two people might have influenced you at a very early stage.

Joseph Koerner

In my undergraduate career, I was a general humanities student in what was called ‘History: the Arts and Letters,’ which was a 'great books course' like St. John's, but at Yale, and that gave me actually an enormous amount of freedom since with all these great books, you can do whatever you wanted to. But I happened to coincide when I was at Yale with the great--in that period--sort of critical revolution around deconstruction and the rejection of the so-called 'new criticism' for much more theoretical and much more kind of penetrating and slightly, always dangerous forms of analysis. The figures at Yale who were the most interesting in the pursuit of these new literary critical models were people associated with the study of Romanticism. So, it was Paul de Man; Harold Bloom; J. Hillis Miller, a little bit; and Geoffrey Hartman, very much. The whole critique of romanticism was very, very appealing to me because actually in those days, one is very much interested in oneself--almost naturally. So, I thought, that kind of self-indulgent representation of self was very enjoyable. But the romantic legacy is the strongest line--I suppose in my work--because I left Yale as a literary critic [and] I went to Cambridge University to study literature. I started to work on James Joyce, but, as a side project, I became interested in re-working some little undergraduate paper I had written about Caspar David Friedrich and the relationship between this artist, this romantic painter, and the motif of the turned traveler, the so-called *Rückenfigur*, which I found--as so many people do—fascinating. [I was] hooked [on] an entire body of theoretical literature, which had come to me by the accident of being at Yale. So, it was Jeffrey Hartman's theories about subjectivity and romanticism, about time and the idea of halting, and then through that, the kind of backstory to Jeffrey Hartman's interest, which are much more philosophical approaches to the subject--Merleau Ponty, Lacan, Satre, and all these people. So, when I put together Caspar David Friedrich with English romantic poetry, with Wordsworth, there was actually an amazing synergy between the two. But for my own forward movement, there was a sense [of] 'this is something I can do, I can use the amazing arsenal and style of criticism as it was called at Yale,' which is not necessarily historical, and yet has a historical kernel to it, which is profoundly about issues of time, subjectivity, suddenness. I was very interested in suddenness and art history, which had very little of that kind of work, which had been done with texts. That was really the shift that I made via romanticism and via literary criticism.

Caro Fowler
So, [when you went] to UC Berkeley were you planning on working on Friedrich when you arrived? Or how did you then transition into working with Alpers and nineteenth century Germany?

Joseph Koerner
Right. So, I have to confess that I applied to art history on the suggestion both of having some kind of idea maybe going forward that was the right thing to do and an advisor Frank Kermode who I was working with at Cambridge actually on James Joyce's Finnegans Wake. It was hard going [with] both Finnegans Wake and literature at that moment. It was such an extremely sophisticated field that to start in it seemed very hard, and so I saw this opportunity and I had no idea really about the field of art history, but a friend of mine, who's a classicist Yopie Prins said, 'Well, there's some interesting people at Berkeley, California doing art history. One of them is called Svetlana Alpers.' And I thought, 'huh, California, art history, and what does she teach?' 'Dutch art.' And I thought, 'Oh, sort of interesting.' But I knew really nothing about the field. I had read a little bit of art history over time, just for coursework, but hardly any partly because art was a family business in my household because my father was a painter, so I was not keen on reading about art. I just sort of decided, 'Oh, well, that sounds like a good path because of those reasons of how the fields were shifting.' But I had no idea who anybody was or what anybody was doing. In fact, I got a call when I was in Heidelberg at that time--between Cambridge and Berkeley, I went to Heidelberg and studied German literature and philosophy--and I got a phone call at the land lady's house, which was three floors down this ancient medieval house. I had never received any phone calls from anybody. But she said, 'Herr Koerner, somebody is calling.' I went into the living room, through the crying children into the one phone in this whole house. They were all staring at me thinking--I think--that somebody had died in the family. And it turns out, it was this guy named Michael Fried, who I had absolutely no idea who he was. But he began to give me an interview about art history, and I had to confess that I neither knew who he was, or much other art historians, but I had read some this, that, and the other thing. We kind of laughed about it. Since then, he remembers the conversation. In short, I didn't have any idea what I was going to do and when I arrived in Berkeley, I thought, 'well, maybe I'm going to have to do Dutch art because that's what Svetlana Alpers works on.' But it was clear very early on that I would have to choose something. She listened to me--Svetlana did--over discussion [at] lunch very early on. She was very sweet, and we had a discussion

term one and she said, 'Oh, no, no, no, none of that romantic stuff.' She said, 'It has to be old, Joseph, you really need to work on something old, something historical, something that basically that you can't project ideas of subjectivity or theories on. You've got to kind of roll up your sleeves and do some work.' And so, I thought, 'okay.' So, as it happened, she was on leave and there was another class of art tradition that I was much more familiar with and felt much stronger about, which was the early Netherlandish field, and it was being taught by Jim Marrow. His way of teaching graduate seminars in those days was to come up with as many unpublished works of art as he could in the form of photographs, throw them on the table and tell everybody to go away with one of them and come back at the end of the term. There were no discussions, there were no seminars, it was just you working. So, I saw a photo of a woodcut that had never been published before by the artist Hans Baldung Grien, an artist that I knew the name of because I knew this very scary painting in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna of death and a maiden and an older woman and a little child and an hourglass. I remember as a child being amazed by the fact that the corpse had flesh that was tattered from the knees. [It was] made probably to look a little like moss. As a child, I was just completely fascinated by the painter, so I thought, despite what Svetlana wanted, I'm going to do something that is related to something kind of uncannily linked to personal history and this bizarre artist of the macabre and witchcraft. I knew a little bit about him, and he had this cool name. So, when I started to scratch the surface there, I realized that it was an arena that I felt I would be able to find something to do work in, which was the German Renaissance period, 15th and 16th century German art. I could speak the language, I was fascinated by the figures, and also, I liked the continuity, actually, between that field of early German art and the Romantic period and the modern period. So, I didn't have to give up the backward glance and become purely historical. And those days, I really didn't think of myself as an art historian, I thought of myself as somebody who's using art as a way to generate a certain kind of writing that otherwise [could] not [be] generated.

Caro Fowler
That's really interesting. Well, that also gets to another question that I had. In preparation for this interview, I did watch your film, *The Burning Child*, and a lot of it evokes the time you spent walking the streets of Vienna with your father. But I was curious--and this kind of gets into it--if you also visit[ed] the museums? Those collections are so central for what you work on, and early modern art, and the city itself is such a bastion of early art history. [Have you] thought any more

about the ways in which those collections have informed you from an early stage in terms of how you think about art history, the objects that you return to, or the objects that stay with you?

Joseph Koerner
That's a really great question. I have to confess; I've never thought about that particular aspect much. I love the movie, Jem Cohen's *Museum Hours*. When I watched it, I just thought, 'Wow, what a great film' because of the way it comes in and out of the Kunsthistorisches Museum and finds a story and uses the museums in wonderful ways. I thought, 'that was a great idea.' But if I think back, I would say that the museum--the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the art historical museum, as it's called--[has] got such a great name because it's so technical. It's like a museum of the discipline of art history in which art is going to be understood as a historical formation. Contrary to its name, I experienced[that museum] as a seamless part of a landscape that was characterized by an overlaying of true and false historical remnants. So, the movement from our house in the most depressing neighborhood in Vienna with its crumbling, Neo-Baroque stucco facades with angels on them...and they were really crumbling because when I first came there as a very young child, I remember seeing bullet holes still on the facades of many of the Viennese buildings, which weren't really renovated until I was maybe seven or nine years old. There were other houses, which one felt sad about, where they just hadn't had enough money to restore the facade, and they just had scraped it down to a gray cement facade, but the gray cement facade, the cheap late 19th century ornaments, the backyards of all these tenement houses, each with its own sort of mysteries, [to] the central city where the ornaments are actually real and mean something--they usually meant who the royal or princely family [was] that had its townhouse there in Vienna. Suddenly, you would go in there, and you'd feel that it looked a little different. The ornaments weren't tacked on, and they had already been a little bit restored, and then going into the Kunsthistorisches Museum--it's actually very late 19th century, weird, fake Italian Palace architecture--into the Bruegel room, the Bruegel room was not an art historical museum. It was a kind of funny, timeless part...timeless in the sense that it was a moment, in which it was a historical object. But all of a sudden, it was like 'this is true art.' And it was true art partly because my father as a painter was always heavily influenced by Bruegel. When he was in the war, he rescued two books from ruined buildings in Berlin. One was a book by Max Dvorák's Bruegel, and the other was Baldass' Bosch monograph. These two had a totemic character, but they were at home in

Pittsburgh in America. So, when we go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, it was finding those works of art. So, in sum, there was a much greater porousness between the world outside the museum and the world inside the museum. I didn't make a clear distinction. And maybe children are like that, generally. But I feel that if I compare the world of where I mainly grew up, which was Pittsburgh, going into a museum, the Carnegie Museum of Art or the natural history museum with the famous dinosaur collection, it was different. There was a sense that that was a different space, the museum space to the urban space, whereas I felt the Kunsthistorisches Museum was one historic part of a historical palimpsest.

Caro Fowler
That's interesting. Well, it also, obliquely gets into another question I had and, interestingly, I was just talking to someone else about the active inner lives of children and kind of the blurring between what we might call reality or imagination and the ways in which things are very animated for children. I was really struck [by your] film, *The Burning Child*. As you said, [it] really comes out of the painting that your father made of his parents and your engagement with the interior--in terms of the view through that interior into the apartment building where you stay. But I was also struck that it's fairly extraordinary. You said your father hung the painting above your bed, is that correct? So, I mean, that's an extraordinary kind of thing to grow up with. Particularly [considering] the ways in which children animate their spaces and the ways in which their own inner lives are so animated, and categories aren't fixed, in the ways that they are when you get older. So, I was just wondering if you could expand on that? I know also in an interview, Benjamin Buchloh asked you about *The Burning Child* and the idea of 'who is the burning child?' But there's also a sense [in which] you are also placed within the category of the child within this dream by having this work placed above your bed within your own very dream space, where things become so blurred. So, what does it mean to grow up with that kind of painting within your own dream space?

Joseph Koerner
Yeah, it's a vivid part of my bedroom scene: a four-poster brass bed, above it, this strange, ominous painting that was also kind of not ominous because it was the painting of my grandparents and my family was very, in a way, nuclear-family-oriented. It was just the two children and the parents, especially when we went to Vienna. We didn't really interact with people, but people would come

over, I'd have friends over, we'd hang out in my room because there was very little private space in the house that we lived in. So, everything took place in my room, and one would discuss the paintings--there were many paintings in the room. So, I would say that first of all, the house was conceived of as a gallery through which to sell the paintings. So, my room was part of the gallery space. There was a kind of mercenary understanding that people would come in and look at the painting, maybe remark about the painting, I would have to have some remark, some rejoinder, because we wanted the paintings to sell [inaudible]. And so, there was a kind of a business relationship to the paintings. That's part one. Part two is I've come to understand that one of the many, many, many peculiarities of my father's undertaking as a painter was that he wanted to paint paintings that would be at home in a bourgeois setting, kind of like the Dutch might have had in the 17th century. He didn't think about that. But if I think, 'what did he really want these paintings to do?' He, of course, wanted them in museums and [to] make him famous. But most of them weren't big enough, really, to be the kind of big, monumental paintings in museums. A lot of these paintings were smaller, and they were kind of domestic. But the thing about them is that there was nothing domestic in the overall undertaking. There was way too much disturbance in the painting for anybody to actually have them in their house. It was very hard to sell them for many reasons, but one is that there was usually something disturbing about them. And yet, they also were intended for this domesticity, and they were often about domesticity. That meant that a lot of the paintings my father did, especially when I was a younger child, when it was hanging in my room, involved us as models in the paintings. The picture was an extension into the family. Painting was somehow about the family, was about a certain domestic space, and its fragility, its dangerous, besieged character. In the Viennese context, it was the space that got invaded when Hitler came in, and Jews had to leave their homes. I think he had this this idea. So, ‘what would have brought him to put that picture into my room,’ I would ask myself? Possibly the idea that we are a family, and this is the story of our family, and you'll have it in your room. Another might be that I think he liked to have enigmas, he liked to tell ghost stories and I think he wanted to have a feeling of both safety and discomfort, and to intrigue his children with puzzles. But the fact that it sits out in my room for all these times meant that I had a much stronger relationship, by the end, to the picture than anyone else, including this one feature of the picture, which is I couldn't figure out how it could be that a painting which was painted in 1944, when from memory of my father's now lost apartment with his parents who were also by then lost would

contain in it as one of its memory details painted completely from memory, the windows of where we ended up living totally by accident in Vienna. That scene, it just seemed to me like there was some higher order, there was some more complicated story about history and destiny that caused this to find its way plunk into my bedroom, this bridge between the past and the present all through whatever this activity was that painting was. So that, of course gave me a picture of art. If I now link it up to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, maybe, it was different for me to go into the Kunsthistorisches museums, into a public art museum in Vienna, especially in Vienna, having paintings of that kind in my room. It was slightly similar. To the point that the painting of the parents is painted on panel, it's painted very, very carefully, it does look a little bit like an early Netherlandish or even more like a German painting of the 15th century, and it has this weird, failed and traumatic reach back into the past.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. Well, I was also struck by something else that was said in the interview. Benjamin Buchloh described you as working from the perspective of exile, which I thought was really interesting because one might not normally assume that for an art historian who grows up in Pittsburgh and go[es] to UC Berkeley. But the point was well taken, and I think, in many ways, that's true. It made me wonder if you've thought about your own trajectory, or your own position within art history in terms of working in exile, and the ways in which the painting, the summers in Vienna, and the history of your family [contributed to] the sense of exile? Art history as a discipline was so powerfully formed by people coming to the US in the 20th century [like] your father did and how important that was for art history as a discipline. And [so I wonder] if you've ever..I somehow doubt that you have, but in your own work and your own engagement with material that people like Panofsky were very much engaged, these commitments are different, although interestingly, it turns out both of you have deep roots in philosophy and literature...[I wonder] if you've ever thought of yourself at the end of this line, this history of art historians coming from 20th century Germany, working in exile, and creating the discipline from this place of exile?

Joseph Koerner
Yes. I've certainly thought about this matter. I think that art history wasn't only founded by exile art historians in the United States, which it certainly was, but in some extremely important way, it was founded in a kind of dual origin between German art historians working and wondering about German-ness and about

cosmopolitanism in the 19th century. So, starting with Winckelmann's dreams of Greece, and then Hegelian art history, which is always somehow pointing to Germany on the one hand, and then on the other hand, Aby Warburg, whose work I read when I was doing literary criticism, he was one art historian I knew very, very well. I was thinking of writing a dissertation on him prior to choosing to go to Berkeley. [I was] thinking of going to the Warburg Institute and writing about him, his work and Walter Benjamin['s], because I also got interested in that. With Warburg, I had a fairly strong feeling of kinship around a number of issues. But I suppose the most simple one is that I never understood the undertaking of an art historian as somehow celebrating the art. It was always to me not about bringing it down, which is a possible thing--making you hate Raphael or making you hate Durer. But it was rather that what interested me is [the] way in which the work of art is related to states of extreme danger and that they flash up in moments of disaster and that they're kind of talismanic objects to get at something that has to do with the traumatic core of one's personal and family history and that art history isn't about showing how good the artist is, but rather looking at it with a kind of magnifying glass for the ruptures and unsettled moments and symptomatic aspects that point to something that goes way back. That's definitely Warburg's undertaking. Now, with Panofsky and with art history as it developed in the United States, I think a lot of that idea of what art history should be looking for changed and there was much more of an attempt to normalize and stabilize the statements that art is supposed to make. But still, there was this kind of analytical dissecting, non-art appreciation side of art history that I not only appreciated but tried to carry forward. So, if I think about the different projects, certainly, the interest in the turned figure in Caspar David Friedrich, my view of what the turn figure was doing in his pictures was not the traditional view, which is that it's a surrogate viewer that enables you to step into the picture and become more one with the picture. Rather, the turned figure was a sign that you couldn't step into the picture and more importantly, that it had a kind of nightmare at the center of the picture, that the turned figure might turn towards you and that that is a kind of horrible Medusa effect. So, I wanted to turn that turned figure into a bad dream. And similarly, in my Durer work, I was interested also in the momentary, in the question of the sudden at the level, first of all, of a sudden historical invention of self-portraiture, but also, the way the sudden historical invention of self-portraiture, which is a kind of myth, is linked immediately to trauma and that takes place in the form of the bizarre work that surrounds self-portraiture in Durer's era like Baldung. So, my tendencies had always been to approach the art object from outside the idea

that it belongs to a triumphalist demonstration of ideal identity in the way that, say, a cosmopolitan museum might about human evolution or about eternal human values or more national projects where the museum is there to uphold and reaffirm local territorial identities. When I came to Harvard, I had the happy fact--which for most people was not so happy--of having right across the street from me--by that time they had already separated--what was called the Germanic Museum, the Busch-Reisinger. A more kind of troubled, ill-fated project in the history of museum building is hard to imagine. [It was] donated right before the first World War, deeply troubled during the Second World War in the United States, and always trying to find an identity, but I found it great because I think that's true of every museum. But the Busch was interesting for me because it was the question of 'German,' therefore the question of the relationship between German and Jewish, between two completely different kinds of identities. And it's in that spirit, I think, that thinking about how art historians in America...without ever mentioning their Jewish identity--Meyer Schapiro, Panofsky, so many art historians, Leo Steinberg--took a contrarian, external, view of what tradition is in one way or the other. That made the discipline, I think. Certainly, in a way, in contradistinction to what you're saying, I didn't feel exiled from it because it itself was a was a discipline to some degree formed by an outsider's perspective on the object compared to, say, literary criticism where you have somebody like Matthew Arnold and TS Eliot, big figures who still remained important in the discipline, even if to reject them. But that was a kind of paradigm of what criticism largely was about, which was finding the essence of literature in order to become part of that voice.

Caro Fowler
That's interesting. In some ways that gets into discussions of your current project, [which is] involved with--as far as I understand--an interest [in the] concept of states of siege, which it seems to me is really about internal discord within--for lack of a better term--a nation state, or the ways in which a government might turn on certain segments of its own population or its own citizenship and suspend their human rights and suspend their property and kind of general laws in relationship to one particular group or one particular minority or majority. In the little I've read about your interest in this project, you've evoked the era of Trump in terms of developing this thinking, but then also, it seems the artists that you're interested in are--if I'm not mistaken--Bosch and Kentridge and Max Beckmann. So, I would be curious to hear you talk about what it is specifically about siege that you find interesting. To me, it seems like

it's this question of the internal and turning on something within. This project might seem to specifically engage with questions that seem very *au current* in art history, and [that] many people are concerned with, but there's a way in which I would argue, you are kind of very much taking an outsider stance to it as well, in terms of your selection of artists, and the ways in which you're constructing the project. You're not constructing it around contemporary artists in the US who are dealing with questions of migration or artists who are dealing with the legacy of slavery in the US. Instead, it seems [like] these questions came from contemporary crises within the US, but in some ways, you're also taking an outsider view to these contemporary debates.

Joseph Koerner
The choice of artists was slightly random, but I have an explanation for the randomness. That is, they are random in the sense that they are artists who, for various reasons, have made a big impact on me. The most obvious is Bosch, who I'd been working on and who I had this very specific story that I wanted to tell, which is how Bosch was received during the years 1941 through 1947, where the chief theorist of the state of exception, or the state of siege and also the chief jurist of the third Reich Carl Schmitt, suddenly sees Bosch in his mind's eye when he's in prison in Nuremburg. At the same time, the writer of the war experience, Ernst Junger, when he's at his worst moment surrounded by partisans in the caucuses suddenly also sees Bosch. I wanted to capture that weird way that Bosch flares up in moments of siege. So, [by] art in a state of siege, I don't primarily mean art that is made in and about siege, but what does art do when one is in a state of siege? How does it appear? How does it flare up? With Beckmann, I happen to teach that painting, the Self Portrait in a Tuxedo, very, very often. I find it a very interesting object physically to talk about at my home institution because it's got this complicated history where it was originally made to say, 'not only am I the great artist, but my work of art is going to create the new social order, the new state. It's going to actually stop the eternal states of siege or states of exception that Weimar Germany had been in, definitively, as the country that couldn't have a legal order, that the legal order constantly had to be suspended.' But when Hitler takes over [and] suspends the law, the painting is jettisoned out of the National Gallery in Germany and finds its way by a circuitous route to the galleries in Harvard. So, that was also a good story. With Kentridge, he actually coined the phrase 'art in a state of siege,' and he understands all his art as both the metaphorical question of siege and also [the] literal state of siege. A literal state of siege is itself complicated, which is, he

began to paint when South Africa, due to the repressive apartheid regime, decided to suspend the law under an emergency decree. Technically, that idea of suspending the law, of putting a state in a state of emergency is particular to modern states. It actually dates back to the Napoleonic era. When what is a literal siege--castle, surrounded by enemies, who either can breach the walls or don't and then the city is saved--is that idea of siege, which goes back to the very beginnings of human civilization. The very beginnings of archaeological evidence are walls and the most horrible descriptions in the Bible of anything are the siege descriptions in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel. So, humans have known what siege is as the most horrible experience that can befall the human, where not only does one die, but cannibalism, children, parents turning against their children, mothers against their infants, all occurs, but that metaphorical understanding of siege then gets transferred into this much more common and very, very modern tool of the defense of the state against its enemies. And that was what paradigmatically was happening in South Africa. William Kentridge is a really interesting artist about that because he maintains that as a kind of manifesto of how his films and drawings and operas are being conducted. But I also think that to understand present day states of siege like the one, for example, we just went through on January 6, which was a classic moment of literal siege of the Capitol, surrounded by a fictional political form of siege in which the institutions of the law might have been suspended by the President, and the main form, which is the peaceful transfer of power by legislation and by voting. That experience, which is happening in our present moment, has one of its characteristics that time, all of a sudden, sort of stopped and because the law is suspended. In fact, in the Roman law, states of siege--what we would call states of emergency--were called *justitium*, they were moments in which Justice came to a standstill like as if the sun suddenly stops. So, in these states, histories and time also starts to have a different characteristic and that actually is for me a model of this punctual art history that I pursue, that is, Bosch flaring up in 1943, Beckmann flaring up for Kentridge. Kentridge's model of art in the state of siege is Beckmann and yet the whole having a history. So, actually, Bosch's work is profoundly about internal siege, about the self besieged by enemies--sin, phantasmagorical enemies like witches and heretics, real enemies like the neighboring people in Den Helder, long distance enemies like Islam who have already overtaken Boschian space. But it's also at that period when the modern state is in formation, so there's a little bit of an archaeology of the state of siege built into my examples. Early modern Bosch [is] really the beginning of the situation that leads to Machiavelli and the idea of a state, and then, obviously,

Beckmann with the most doubly famous states of siege on the one hand, the Nazi regime as a permanent state of siege, and then the degenerate art exhibition through which Beckmann is expelled, which is art itself in a state of siege, that artists have to leave. It's a mixture of a story about art in a state of siege that is punctuated by episodes, but also a kind of history of how we get to this state, from the early modern period to the present day.

Caro Fowler
Well it also reminds me of something you said about monuments that I thought was really interesting, [you said] that they become forgotten and unconscious and then they become ignited during the states of [inaudible] or states of siege which I think is a very productive way to think about the debates around monuments right now, but it also importantly points to the ways in which they can't just become undone and then be closed away into a storage facility, but that there might be a continual returning or continual igniting.

Joseph Koerner
Yeah, when you don't notice them, they really have this effect of disappearing into the landscape in ways that are quite extraordinary. I've passed in Cambridge common the statues, which I've no idea what they are. Big statues, whether they're Lincoln...I actually don't remember [them] even though I pass them every day. That's why the Viennese writer Robert Musil said that the best way to make sure that a person's forgotten is by making a monument of them. On the other hand, when something is triggered, they have that new force as if there's no time that has passed.

Caro Fowler
So, I was just kind of curious, as you've invested so much in terms of thinking about art in the state of siege, I wonder if you do think about also the juxtaposition that Kentridge himself poses in terms of art in a state of grace and the ways in which grace might play into your project on siege?

Joseph Koerner
If I were to tie things back to a story that for me was very interesting as a kind of corrective to my general tendencies--which is to look for the traumatic as opposed to the..or but not look for, but to kind of go down that direction...Very early on when I [had] just made the decision to go to Berkeley and do art history, I was encouraged to write a little text about a painting that my father did of me--

a big painting, the size of a wall in which I'm in the position of Daedalus. I tried to make sense of the picture. I thought about him as an artist of exile. I was interested in how he painted his paintings so that they could be moved and I wrote a sentence that I thought was quite good, which was something to the effect of 'My father painted his paintings in pieces because he needed to transfer them from the United States to Vienna and back again, but also because he knew that wherever he would live, he might have to pack his bags and leave the terrible scene. And that they were like a portable home, like the Torah is to the Jews, a portable home.' [I] wrote that sentence, typed it on [inaudible] paper, which is you could erase it. Years later--it must have been about 10 or 15 years later--when I was going through my father's papers after he had died and my mother gave me all the stuff to sort through--I came upon the original manuscript that I had sent him of that text and he had crossed out the words 'and flee the terrible scene,' and written in his big handwriting 'wonderous scene.' I had been getting him wrong all along. Yeah, there was terror, but what motivated him in painting is not the terror, the trauma, solely. Or it was the terror and the trauma, but under the much larger and much more positive world of wonder. So, I would say that grace is not something that comes easy to me, but I hope that I can become more attentive to the wonderous as something that comes very close to the aesthetic, which is what we do when we look at works of art. Art in a state of siege is also about the transformation of siege situations into something that is an aesthetic appearance, and the flashing forward has something to do with the aesthetic. But I also think that just at a personal, emotional level, keeping in play wonder, as opposed to repudiation or all sorts of negativities about the tradition is very important. I think that's true of Kentridge. I think that what a lot of his art is about is play as a kind of form of wonder. He even says that, and I think that play is also deeply connected with the possibilities that the aesthetic gives. I mean, that's one of the theories of Rancière I find rather impenetrable, but inspiring, is that there's something about the aesthetic sphere that in times of political turmoil actually have some function because they inhabit a zone which is more playful, and I think sort of wonder begins to capture--with all sorts of problems--but at least for me, it begins to capture because it was so much what I had left out of my own long standing attempts to make sense of the pictures that had been hanging around me as a child.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. Well, that's a lovely note to end on. Thank you, Joseph.

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Joseph Koerner
Well, thank you.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the books, articles, and artworks discussed, please consult clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors, past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan.