

*IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*  
A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

**“Philosophical Grounding”: Michael Ann Holly on Creating Visual Studies**

Season 1, Episode 11  
Release date: November 17, 2020

Transcript

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 of *In the Foreground*, I speak with Michael Ann Holly, Director Emeritus of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark. Before establishing RAP [Research and Academic Program] in the late 1990s, Michael founded the Department of Visual Studies at the University of Rochester, the first of its kind in the U.S. In our conversation, we discuss what initially drew her to art history, the early years of the Research and Academic Program here at the Clark, and the ways in which she finds consolation in art and nature.

Michael Ann Holly:

*Because it's more like the landscape here is my unconscious and RAP was my consciousness.*

Caro Fowler:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Michael. You are still so integral to the Research and Academic Program at the Clark and we really the program that you set up is so strong because of the work that you did. One thing that I've heard you talk about a little bit, but I would love to hear more about: so you pursued a PhD a little later in life, no? I mean, it's not that you went straight into a PhD program.

Michael Ann Holly:

I didn't go straight to college, that's the problem. [Both laugh] I was delayed all the way around.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

No, I had a baby when I was 18. So that, that delayed certain things, yes.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Michael Ann Holly:

I was pregnant at the first year I was in college and I was thrown out of college - that's, those were the days. And so I went to live at home and I did not go to college. How old was I? I think I was probably, probably 25 when I went to college. I then was married to my first husband who was, who had his first teaching job at Hobart and William Smith, a college I will always feel great attachment to. And because he had just joined there after writing his dissertation, they allowed me to go tuition-free. So...

Caro Fowler:

Oh, okay.

Michael Ann Holly:

I, I'm grateful because I was going to be a science major when I was 18 and a zoologist. I wanted to be a zoologist. But by the time I went there later, I was interested in humanities.

Caro Fowler:

And so did you take art history courses in college that first made you interested in the discipline?

Michael Ann Holly:

I did. It was a small department. I think it had three art historians. I took, the ones I remember most were taught by historians who were teaching art history. It was at the cusp -

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

- There of where they were moving from other disciplines into art history. And I had great Renaissance art history teachers - I mean, history teachers. Nancy Struever was a well known one. Marvin Bram Frank O'Laughlin. And then, the only art history I took was - by way of Alison Kettering -

Caro Fowler:

Mm, oh wow.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Was Northern Renaissance.

Caro Fowler:

Of course, yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

Yeah. But I did enough art history because of those historians also teaching that I could do a double major, but I didn't apply to graduate school. Except in intellectual history, of the philosophy of history I was interested in. I was told I was accepted at Cornell in the history department, but they could give me a lot more money if I wanted to do art history.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

I could do [laughs] - so I thought, sure, [laughs] you know, can I take courses in both? I was so lucky because even though it was a small flourishing department at the time it had in my first year both Gombrich and Baxandall came as visiting professors.

Caro Fowler:

Wow, that sounds nice.

Michael Ann Holly:

And they split a seminar at different, different times.

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

And, you know, I was so thrilled to be working with them, but of course they left after that year and I thought, I'd be a medievalist. I was going to write a dissertation on the Romanesque lion. Good. [Both laugh]. So I was bringing zoology [continue laughing], but it, uh... That didn't interest me that much. I decided to go back to history, intellectual history, and since so many people were writing historiography at the, at the time, it seemed to me why not do that in art history? So I [laughs], rather boldly picked [continues laughing], chose Panofsky and then a Kress fellowship took me to the Warburg to study, not only with Gombrich and Baxandall, but a particular favorite, Michael Podro, who had just written "The Critical Historians of Art."

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

And Michael suggested I start attending his Kunstwissenschaft graduate seminars at Essex. We would ride the train from London together once a week, and I learned so very much for him. I was a little bit of a funny story: When I first arrived in London, um I - Gombrich had invited me and I tried to arrange a meeting with him and he said, well, he was a little under the weather and I had to come to his house. So I was in such a state about this, go to Gombrich's house.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

"Art And Illusion" had been a terribly important book to me. And I went to his house and his wife showed me into this Viennese bourgeois interior, and then Gombrich came out wearing his stripe pajamas. [Laughs] And I was so... I, nothing would ever terrify me as much as that meeting, I swear.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

Uh but he got better, and um I would audit there. They weren't really - they were reading courses - but Paul Duro's at Essex was a full-fledged you know seminar devoted to "The Critical Historians of Art." So that's, that's how I had gotten, gotten there just because that's what historians were doing. And I liked the intellectual history, the history of history writing and other ones.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. How did you choose Panofsky as as the figure to focus on?

Michael Ann Holly:

[Laughs]

Caro Fowler:

What was it about him that - [both laugh] - that fascinated you?

Michael Ann Holly:

[Laughs] Lord knows. It was awfully bold of me. I thought, I just remember being so curious that all this historiography was being written around me and other disciplines and not - I hadn't read anything except Michael Podro's book -

Caro Fowler:

Uh, huh.

Michael Ann Holly:

- On the critical historian. And I thought, why don't I just choose an aspect of it? And on those train rides with Michael, I checked, "Do you think I dare do this?" And he was very encouraging and I read like, uh, that whole year. I also had a baby that year, so it was reading with baby on my tummy.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

Um but he encouraged me to study more of [Ernst] Cassirer. He had me translate -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Cassirer, and I hardly had done any translation - I was very bad at that. But once I got so involved with Cassirer and then saw that there were all these early papers - German papers: Wölfflin, Riegl, Panofsky -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- That were very theoretical.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

Not like American art history -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs] Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- At all at the time. And so I thought, well, let's, you know, start with Panofsky and see where the trail, uh, takes you.

Caro Fowler:

Does he remain kind of a, a through line for you throughout all your work?

Michael Ann Holly:

Uh you know um what I do now is so different -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- From anything Panofsky would have sanctioned.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

But of course, course he's important.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

He's important in one major way. And that he, he was a thinking art historian -

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

- And he wasn't just a practicing art historian. He was involved with so many philosophical issues when he was a very young man in his twenties.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

He was writing perspective as a symbolic form. And had I not seen the possibilities of art history in that direction, uh I don't know that I would have been able to do anything other than a study of the Romanesque lion, but...

Caro Fowler:

Well, and it even seems today, I mean, Panofsky, and iconography often get dragged out as kind of an uncritical art history -

Michael Ann Holly:

Yeah. They, they do.

Caro Fowler:

- [inaudible] Art history. But in fact, as you say, he was so philosophically engaged and... [Inaudible].

Michael Ann Holly:

Oh yeah. And, and, you know, I fell in the spaces between iconography and iconology. And that even those, those attempts at a characterization of the difference -

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Between the two was something that really interested me for, for a long time.

Caro Fowler:

And so was [University of] Rochester, your first job out of graduate school?

Michael Ann Holly:

No, no. I went right back to Hobart and William Smith where my husband was teaching in the English department.

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Michael Ann Holly:

Uh he's still teaching there. It's quite amazing. It's his first job and it's a wonderful school, wonderful experimental liberal arts college.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And they were looking for somebody to teach medieval and Renaissance art around the time I was getting my PhD. So, I went there, I eventually got tenure there.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And then Rochester came calling and it was only an hour away. My husband and I were separated by then, and I thought it made more sense than for me not be teaching at the same -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Small school, no matter how much I loved it - he was Dean of the faculty. [Both laugh] So I drove every day to Rochester. I still lived in Geneva so that my children could be with their father. And Rochester asked me to come talk to them, which I did. And I, again, it was just a lucky chance because this was the height of Xerox and Kodak money. They said in effect: they'd had a kind of moribund master's program in art history, but they said if I came, I could in effect build a department. Money was there for hiring whoever I would deem would be important to build a PhD program in art history at Rochester, but I just didn't want it to be another tried and true art history department.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And so that's how the first person I worked... There, there were such wonderful hirings there and I don't know anybody could do that again. I mean Mieke [Bal], first of all. What I, I am so indebted to her for so many things. Kaja Silverman, Norman Bryson, um Lisa Cartwright, Connie [Constance] Penley David Rodowick Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Janet [Catherine Berlo]... Well, we were able to hire all of those people -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- And put them in the art history department and then not call it art history because they came from so many different directions. Those were heady, fun, sometimes frustrating days because of, we were always battling the regent's board in New York state. And the administration was suspicious of what we were trying to do. Were we ever going to get these graduate students jobs under this weird rubric? But by the time I left there, and we had so many successful former graduate students -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, of course.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Who got their degrees from Rochester, that even the president of the university was calling it eight years later maybe, the jewel in the crown of Rochester... But it was, it was so much luck, so much serendipity.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

I can't, I really resist taking much credit for how easy it was to put things together.

Caro Fowler:

Was that one of the first departments to kind of unite itself under the rubric of visual culture?

Michael Ann Holly:

Oh, it was the first -

Caro Fowler:

It was the first.

Michael Ann Holly:

- I, I am very proud of that. California was the second. I remember I was on the CAA Board [of Directors] at that time, and I remember trying to get the um... Phrase 'visual studies' into some of the job applications. And the others were so resistant - that it takes away from art history. 'What is visual study?' And now, it's just amusing to me that every job description... [Both laugh] If only I could have known then. And so now it's almost become a useless term because -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- It doesn't have that toughness, that fight in it [that] it did then.

Caro Fowler:

What was that toughness? I mean, what did the term mean to you then that, that art history wasn't conveying?

Michael Ann Holly:

Probably it meant something to me that it didn't mean to other people.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

To me it meant, first of all, critical theory: critical theory, married to art history, using contemporary critical theories from, from identity politics to deconstruction, to break open the, the sh- the shell of art history that had hermetically sealed. So I don't know that people would now say that. It also meant - and you can see that from the kind of people I was able to hire - it broadened the definition of art. We could go to film, for example, and that hadn't often been in art history departments. But we had anthropologists, we went to medical experts, we went to television. I never did that. I was still teaching medieval and Renaissance art. [Both laugh] But I was teaching it from a perspective to the left of where it had, had been before. Today what, how, I don't... It's, it's so capacious a term, it's almost as though art history gets subsumed under it.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

It's, I mean, it welcomed tradition. We admitted and had teachers... People did traditional courses.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

It's not as though we, you know mainly tore everything down. We just built up other things alongside it. And then the graduate students interested in those challenges started coming to us. I feel that I had have had three, roughly fifteen-year jobs: one at Hobart and William Smith, one at Rochester, and one at the Clark. So time can hedge a little bit here, but yeah, it was... They were heady times and they were so challenging times. And to have those people working all together, building something that... I mean, Mieke [Bal] and I - we had an old floppy disc, a giant thing that we would take turns taking home at night and tinkering with it. And I think she found it recently and she had it framed. [Both laugh] I was going to have it half the year, and she was going to have it... [Both laugh] Oh, but we had so much, we had fun doing it. And it, you know, what we were, we were relatively young and the world was open to us. And art history had, it was going to slowly die, a slow death, I thought. If we were called the Department of Fine Arts at Rochester, and if that's what it was about: quality and art, about masterpieces, about, you know, brilliant artists - not looking at other, all the other possibilities that you could pull in, reign in under that, that term. So...

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. So then, so was it Michael Conforti, who tapped you to come to the Clark Art Institute?

Michael Ann Holly:

Hank Mellon.

Caro Fowler:

Of course.

Michael Ann Holly:

Hank Mellon was the first director of the Center for Advanced Study at the National Gallery of Art. And I had been there twice as a fellow and he was on the board here. And he and Frank Oakley - I must give real credit to Frank Oakley and Michael Conforti - invited me to come and talk to them about the possibility. Here was this great library [at the Clark]. I mean, an amazing library and only a handful of people using it.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

Master's students and a couple of teachers from the art department. And I just, I thought, I just was too happy at Rochester. I didn't want to do it, but I did eventually get seduced into this. And Darby came with me. Darby English was a graduate student [at] Rochester, and he had been a[n undergraduate] student here at Williams. So, he came with me and we just, it was a little bit like the first days of Rochester. Keith [Moxey, her partner] and I were running together the National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars for scholars and the Clark thought, 'Well that's the kind of thing we would maybe like to do here.' So just one of those things that came together.

Caro Fowler:

What was your original vision for the program? I mean, what were the guiding... [Both laugh] What were the guiding principles for you in establishing it? What did you think was the necessary part of running the program?

Michael Ann Holly:

What was the necessary... Well, again, I wanted the kind of thing that I was interested in - the intellectual history of the discipline, critical history of the discipline along with, again, along with, and not in opposition to what I, what I considered the history of art. So, but I must have told you this story because Darby and I still laugh about it. We came in and we got in our offices [laughs] and Darby said to me, 'So now what we do?' [Both laugh] It's great to have all this money, but we've got to invent something.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Michael Ann Holly:

And he said, and he said, 'Well, I think I'll sharpen the pencils.' I'd been a fellow at the Getty at that point a couple of times. And I kind of put CASVA [Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts] together with the Getty and then cut out what I didn't like in those programs, and then invented [at the Clark] this smaller center for advanced study and art history.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And what we didn't realize was how, how quickly it would take off. I think that, that at this point the humanities were ready for something like that. We started with two or three fellows and John Onians had been here for a year before me.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Michael Ann Holly:

I certainly should give him credit. He and Michael [Conforti] had worked together imagining this, this institute or whatever we want to call it, this program. The one thing I wanted to be sure I did was get it notice, so we invited only major scholars -

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Michael Ann Holly:

- Or major scholars according to Michael Holly. [Both laugh] But they were, they were major.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And once it was clear for the first two, two or three years, that anybody who was in the discipline everybody who was anybody in the discipline, wanted to come here. They were coming with their Guggenheims or their Rockefellers, or - they just wanted to be here. And that's where the landscape is so important.

Caro Fowler:

Yes, the landscape is so important. I was thinking about it because I read your response in "The Art Bulletin" to your melancholy and art history essay, and then the response you start with entering into the landscape and kind of going out to take a walk through the -

Michael Ann Holly:

Oh, I did, I forgot that. Yeah. [Both laugh] I forgot that [I wrote it that way]. Yeah. [Continue laughing]

Caro Fowler:

- [landscape] to think about how you were going to frame your response. So you brought the landscape of the Berkshires and Williamstown into "The Art Bulletin." What is it about the landscape that you think is so specific or how for you - especially someone who is engaged so deeply in phenomenological encounter and embodied encounter - how do you think the landscape specific to the Berkshires has impacted your own writing?

Michael Ann Holly:

Yeah, it's, it's not an easy question to answer because it's more like my landscape here is my unconscious and and RAP was my consciousness.

Caro Fowler:

Of course, yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

When I thought I was doing a favor for Hank Mellon to come and talk to Frank Oakley and Michael about what they might do here... When I drove into - I [am] pretty sure I told you this, too - when I drove into the landscape on a winter's eve after a, a small ice storm, and I felt like I was driving into something from some mystical, magical, glittering...I never even, I guess I'd heard of the Berkshires, but I'd never come here. And I very soon felt very situated, very comfortable in this landscape and the changing seasons were so important. You know, I had lost my child. My younger son died when he was a boy, and I found only landscape is, was consoling. So, whenever I didn't know what I was doing or was feeling sad or anything, what was, where did I go? Out into the hills [here]. I, I started calling them mountains - I was quickly disabused of that term. [Laughs] 'The hills, we're not the mountains.' And I always would be taking walks -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

- With my, my dogs. Keith was still, you know, for 15 years was still [teaching] at Columbia. So he wasn't here during the week. So it was, I was the one with a series of different dogswalking them. But, going into the landscape, I'm so grateful to be here during this, this world that we're in now [in 2020, during the pandemic], because I go out with the dogs every day.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, it is so beautiful outside.

Michael Ann Holly:

And what's happened here is that the animals that were in the shadows - now that the people have retreated to the shadows [during lockdown] - the animals have come out. And we've seen wonderful things -

Caro Fowler:

Oh, really?

Michael Ann Holly:

- Everyday, a bald eagle flies over our driveway. [Laughs]

Caro Fowler:

Oh, that's incredible. That's wonderful. Did you never find that same consolation in art or in museums? I mean, people, I feel like right now, people always talk about art as a site of consolation. There's all these digital initiatives.

Michael Ann Holly:

Yes, no of course -

Caro Fowler:

But I've always - I agree with you - I've always found landscape ultimately, the outdoors more compelling -

Michael Ann Holly:

Mhm, mhm.

Caro Fowler:

- For my kind of inner self, but, there always feels like a push and pull for that, being an historian.

Michael Ann Holly:

No. If, if... Now you asked me about that - you know, my early connection to visual arts - because when I think of my later connections, I always loved landscape painting, but I never wrote about it. And then just this past year, I wrote a bit about landscape for a couple of essays. But my earliest connection - and it is a kind of sweet story, and I, I don't... I guess I'd kind of like to write about it sometime: I was adopted when I was eight years old. Did I tell you this story?

Caro Fowler:

No, I don't think I've heard this story.

Michael Ann Holly:

And I mean, I still know my biological mother, but I had a Russian grandmother who had come to this country when she was 17. She was a white Russian during the various purges. And she went to work for the for the Pentagon. And she knew I was being adopted away from the biological family. And she came to visit me in the small town I lived in, in the South, and she brought me - I'm looking across my bookshelf there [now], it's still pride of place - a child's introduction to art history. I never, I never knew about art and I didn't come from a family that was interested in art. And this book is tattered and falling apart. But she wrote - and it was the last time I saw her ever - she wrote in the beginning page 'To the sweetest eight year old. Look at pictures.' She said, 'look at pictures.' So, that - I obviously looked at pictures.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

And I remember... And the pictures I looked at were late medieval Renaissance pictures. So that, that stayed with me. I didn't... I, maybe that's why I took some courses in college. But it was after Alexander, my son, died that pictures really became the consolation. And paintings, almost exclusively paintings, not just from 500, 600 years ago, but contemporary art as well. And that always surprised me, because I never studied it. But so yes, that's a consolation [in art] as well.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Well, so much of your work and your writing is really - especially in your last book - is so deeply engaged with melancholy and loss, that you argue is integral to the art historical process.

Michael Ann Holly:

Right.

Caro Fowler:

That we will, we will always be.... The moment we start to write about an object or to face an object, we lose it.

Michael Ann Holly:

We lose it. [Both laugh].

Caro Fowler:

I know...

Michael Ann Holly:

You know, Blanchot once said with every word we speak or write about art, we distance ourselves even more from it because it's the language that interferes.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

That's how phenomenology had such an appeal to me.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Well and it's such a profound, philosophical problem that, that I feel like you've thought about throughout really your whole career. And maybe it, it came out the most strongly in your last book, but you also in your last book, with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and her own mourning and her own, the loss of her own son...

Michael Ann Holly:

Right.

Caro Fowler:

So many of your colleagues like Mieke Bal and, but more more Griselda [Pollock], often integrated their own autobiography into their writing, whereas it seems you, you've, you've made a very conscious decision not to insert your own autobiography into your writing - although I'm sure it must be incredibly present...

Michael Ann Holly:

It's there, because, why, I mean I only started writing about melancholy and art after my, my son died.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

But I think in the first prologue to that book, I do, I do mention that. But it's, it's more like a hidden wave or a hidden chord or something running under what I write.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

I'm not trying to push it away because it's so deeply there. It's, again, like a kind of unconscious of what I write that often comes to the fore. But when I was so miserable after my son died. Friends at Rochester, they were very good to give me a year off, just to be. I mean, it's, it's unbelievably difficult. I would walk around the streets of - I went to live with Keith in New York [City] - and I would walk around the streets of New York and realize that looking at all the anonymous faces that I would pass on the Upper West Side and realized that everybody has some loss in their life, whether it's the loss of a person loss of an idea, or... And I just out of desperation, I began reading about mourning and melancholia. I was always attempted by psychoanalysis. Anyway, that's always been an interest of mine. But I really fell deeply into it. And it's, it's how I could stitch together my fascination with works of art, with loss, with history, with the past, you know, that made sense to me. And so that is autobiographical.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

I don't know that I-, that book would have been written at that time. I, you know, would have done something else, but it was its own consolation.

Caro Fowler:

What are the texts in critical theory that you really stuck with throughout your entire tenure of teaching that you just found absolutely fundamental?

Michael Ann Holly:

My phenomenologists always came up, but I wanted it to be very balanced in what I offered the students. But Heidegger was there, Merleau-Pontypeople in... People who were important in the formation and the evolution of the discipline away from straight-forward art history. So we would, we

would have a week on deconstruction. We would have a week on feminism. We would have a week on identity politics just to make them - not make them, I hate that term - but to have them become aware of the variety of thinkers about the visual that you wouldn't necessarily get in an art history course. So, you know, two of my favorites are Georges Didi-Huberman, and I think he's terrific. And then in American art historian, Alexander at Stanford -

Caro Fowler:

- oh, Nemerov.

Michael Ann Holly:

Yes, [Alexander] Nemerov.

Caro Fowler:

So, in terms of teaching, I mean what have you seen - you've been so deeply involved in the discipline of art history. I mean, both in starting the program at Rochester, your committee work with CAA [College Art Association], your committee work with the National Humanities Institute in North Carolina, RAP. So you've really been deeply involved in the humanities and art history for your whole career. What are the major changes and what has happened in the discipline that has surprised you or that you perhaps didn't see coming?

Michael Ann Holly:

I didn't... When I came here [to the Clark], I don't think, it never even entered my mind what global art history was or would be. And I was flying by the seat of my pants when we began doing programs in other places. Eastern Europe was the first - I had done that for the Getty for a number of times - and South Africa and the Pacific Rim. I had no idea how much that would take off, the idea [of global art history].

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

I mean, I think it's absolutely crucial. I never write about it. I don't even read about it that much. But I lived it when we, we were always taking our program on the road, so to speak, or across the seas and not to the, the usual places. I learned so much from so many people and particularly in Eastern Europe.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

I, it also, it just happened to work because that's what the funding agencies were interested in. And so, we would be well situated to try to do our little tiny research institute on an international scene. I also was at the time I was for six years, I think the chair of RIHA [The International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art] that had me, made me, acquainted with all these artists drawings from different worlds, with different questions and totally different answers. That was very, very important.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. What did the initiatives in Eastern Europe really open up for you? Because I've heard you say that you felt those were some of your more successful international initiatives.

Michael Ann Holly:

Well, it's, I... Their way, their way of asking questions, their way of saying what works what periods were important, how important the political commitment to works of art was to them. I always kind of separated, you know, art and politics. But in particular, I mean, it was about the way, the way they lived and the battles they were fighting. I mean, it was amazing to be able to persist with a humanities program in the wake of everything that was going on in Eastern Europe. We were in Belarus when they closed the university because of the, one of the major reasons was because of the seminars that we were doing there. And we were summarily dismissed had to leave and to know, to recognize and acknowledge, and mainly just be in awe of people [there], who studied the humanities at all costs.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Michael Ann Holly:

That it, that it mattered. The humanities really mattered - just didn't matter in an academic way. But mattered in lives touched, touched by [the humanities].

Caro Fowler:

It's such an important point. It's something I've seen just in a short, in my short time in this role - the international scholars we've brought in, I realized how incredibly privileged we are to take art history -

Michael Ann Holly:

I know, really.

Caro Fowler:

- As a discipline for granted. To take for granted our access to libraries and electronic resources and, and how many people are so deeply, as you say, dedicated to art history and the humanities as a political cause, that to be able to even study these subjects in a way that is intellectually free is, is to be politically engaged [over] there.

Michael Ann Holly:

Right? And they, when they say when a Polish art historian studies issues of formalism, what they mean is absolutely counter to what we might ask of them. Formalism is a political position. For us it was simply a method for thinking about works of art.

Caro Fowler:

I think it's an exciting time in art history right now, because it does feel so open.

Michael Ann Holly:

Oh, yeah.

Caro Fowler:

And I think so much of the work that you and your peers did around, in the nineties around opening it up to critical theory - it's really, made it a vital field...

Michael Ann Holly:

Yeah. Yeah. Who knew? Again, I don't know - I think Mieke knew. Mieke definitely was more advanced [laughs] than I was. But I - even she, and all her perspicacity did not know how important it, this sort of bursting open, was going to be and how we were by chance in, on it. That was great.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, that's great. Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Michael. It's fun -

Michael Ann Holly:

Sure.

Caro Fowler:

- Really, chatting. I hope we'll be able to see each other in person before the new year.

Michael Ann Holly:

[Laughs] Oh, well who knows.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs] Who knows...

Caro Fowler:

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. Our guest today, Michael, also wanted to make sure to acknowledge the vital collaboration of the associate directors who worked with her during her time as director of RAP, including Darby English, Mariëtt Westermann, Mark Ledbury, David Breslin, and Christopher Boyer, as well as her partner in scholarship and life, Keith Moxey. More information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). The program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Paige, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.