

IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“THE ETHICS OF SEEING”:
KAIRA M CABAÑAS ON CREATIVE CARE AND ART’S
HISTORIES**

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Transcript

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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.

Caitlin Woolsey

I'm Caitlin Woolsey, Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program, and in this episode, I continue our mini-series focused on sound media and visual art in conversation with Kaira M. Cabañas, Professor of Art History at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she is also affiliate faculty in the Center for Latin American Studies and the Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women's Studies Research. Kaira describes how her early work helped her think about the relations and discontinuities between cultural contexts and she shares her most recent project focused on transatlantic exchanges in art and psychiatry, and she critiques what is often perceived as the current crisis in the discipline asking, 'a crisis for whom?'

Kaira M. Cabañas

To me, it doesn't seem like a crisis in art history, [but] a crisis for a privileged subject position, who could write art history and determine which art histories count. And I think we need to own sometimes the historical paradox of how one art historian's crisis is another's achievement. So, how is it that women, LGBTQ, and people of color were and are writing art history and those histories of artistic production and those of the global south are reconfiguring art history from within? For me, this is an accomplishment, this is not a crisis.

Caitlin Woolsey

Thank you so much for joining me today, Kaira, it's a real pleasure to have a chance to speak with you.

Kaira M. Cabañas

Thank you. It's great, Caitlin, to speak with you in this context.

Caitlin Woolsey

We typically open these conversations by asking how you came to art history?

Kaira M. Cabañas

I think I'll begin by saying what I always tell my students. That basically, there's nothing in my background that would suggest that I would end up an art historian. So, I'm the first generation [of my family] born in the United States, and also the first and only to earn a PhD. I was born in Hialeah, Florida. Both my parents are Cuban. My dad was an immigrant. My mom was a political refugee. And they each come from a family of hairdressers, a fact of which I'm quite proud of. I grew up in a multi-generational, bilingual, and bicultural home. So, when I started undergrad at Duke, I began as a pre-med and biology major. I think most of my students are usually somewhat taken aback by this fact. But being pre-med and a biology major was in part, I thought that the path is open to me. In this I think is part of the child of immigrants narrative, it's like, that's what you do, you become a doctor or a lawyer, right? I hadn't been exposed to any other career options and I was studious. But I had challenges with reading comprehension and went to an after school learning center when I was in middle school, and I was hard working and graduated first in my class, but I had in high school no idea, no sense of what it meant to study the humanities or art history. So, and in part, I always begin this way when teaching because as students, we have this tendency to project onto our professors that they've always already possessed their knowledge. But I also wanted to affirm how as a Latina daughter of immigrants, art history wasn't necessarily my initial go to, so I didn't feel initially that I belonged to the discipline, but that I did eventually make art history my own. I come to think of this a little bit the way Félix González-Torres made minimalism his own. It's important, I think, to emphasize how knowledge about a subject is not naturally given, but also how my positionality continues to impact my work. So, in terms of how I turned to art history, specifically, I mentioned this kind of feeling of thinking it wasn't for me. When I went into my first art history classes at Duke, I would see the slides go by and very much felt that that history was not part of my history. But I've actually studied abroad in Madrid, and it was being in front of like, Velázquez and Goya's works that began to shift things for me and it wasn't just because I was in front of their works--in front of the actual work--but it was also having a professor take us through the Prado. I just remember looking at her speaking in front of all these works and thinking, 'Oh, wow, you can make a living doing that.' So, after that I began then leaking information to my parents very deliberately. I was like, 'I'm no longer a

biology major, but I'm still pre-med mom and dad,' you know? And then, I'm no longer either. And then comes the inevitable response. 'Oh, well, what are you going to do?' I kind of came [to art history] through happenstance in part, wonderful exposure to art as an undergrad, the virtues of going into a humanities core curriculum, and being exposed to other things that weren't biology and pre-med in my initial years as an undergrad.

Caitlin Woolsey

Was there something about the kind of knowledge production in art history or the kind of stories that you could tell or questions that you could ask that you felt to be distinct from what you were able to pursue or had to pursue in biology and a kind of pre-med track, previously? Was there something in particular that gripped you about art history? Or was it more the kind of proximity both intellectual and actual, to the works of art in and of itself?

Kaira M. Cabañas

My undergraduate major is not in art history. So, I think that's important to state. I kind of had begun this slow shift away from the sciences. And then the break was consolidated when I was exposed to art history, but that was really as I was entering in--if memory serves--my junior year, so I actually majored in comparative area studies and had a minor in cultural anthropology. I think the exposure to art history made me realize that sometimes the intangibles of cultural production can be made concrete and an object. So, I think it was the object focus of art history that, in part, got me on this path to study visual production, from film to art objects.

Caitlin Woolsey

And within comparative area studies you were focused--as I understand it--on Latin America and Western Europe at that time?

Kaira M. Cabañas

Yes, I was. So, my primary area was Latin America, and my secondary area was Western Europe. What was great about that was it was an interdisciplinary major, so I only had to take classes that corresponded to those two geographic regions, but they could be from art history, history, cultural anthropology, political science, and so that provides a highly contextual list, an interdisciplinary understanding of an area.

Caitlin Woolsey

And were there professors or other sort of mentors during that time that you felt were particularly important to you either from your art history work or in these other disciplines?

Kaira M. Cabañas

Well, as an undergrad, Kristine Stiles was an important professor for me. And I took her performance art class, which exposed me to Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann, artists like Sherman Fleming, and I have to say, the class totally rocked my world. I was like, totally unprepared. I was totally unprepared and totally blown away by Carolee Schneemann's performance of *Interior Scroll*. I often say that it was Kristine's class that really sealed the deal for me in terms of choosing to pursue art history. Without having taken her class as an undergrad, maybe my career path would have been different. But she did open up the diversity of modern and contemporary artistic practice to me in a way that was quite important for my development, for sure.

Caitlin Woolsey

And when you went on to pursue graduate work, was that attention to performance and to work that is sort of culturally and politically engaged a defining factor of your focus or your interest at that time? Or how are you thinking about yourself and your interests or your work within art history going into graduate school?

Kaira M. Cabañas

So, in terms of arriving at graduate school, thinking a bit about my undergraduate degrees and comparative area studies and anthropology, I think [what] helped me work through was really how to think about the relations between cultural contexts--which I think also was something I was exposed to in the performance art class as well. But not only the relations between cultural context, but also the discontinuities between cultural contexts. So, I think for me, in retrospect, cultural anthropology was an important part of my undergraduate learning. The discipline of anthropology is rightly critiqued for its colonial underpinnings, but I also think that in its best form and practice it defamiliarizes and denaturalizes our assumptions of what we take to be self-evident truths. In that regard, I always remember an anthropology seminar I took with Professor Claudia Strauss on motherhood and being struck by how feelings of motherly or parental care, not only shift depending on the cultural

context, but also how such emotions are impacted by poverty in places like Northeastern Brazil. So, that was formative. When I arrived in art history--and so initially at Yale--I thought I was going to focus on Latin American art, but it wasn't being taught in the department. I did have some training within modern art history. The appreciation for what is called the global modern is not what it is today, but at Yale, I was fortunate to work with Kellie Jones and in the context of an independent study designed syllabus on Latin American conceptualist practices. I also worked as a research assistant producing an annotated bibliography on modern art in Latin America. So, in graduate school the only university, graduate training I had on the modern art of Latin America was with Kellie Jones, which I think is great. So, there's a way in which my primary and secondary areas were reversed in grad school, that my secondary area of Western European art became primary, and the secondary area was not part of my formal training. I mean, there's a generation now in the US that have written their dissertations, published their books, on modern art of Latin America, so I think there's a very robust conversation going on. I think generationally, they may be four or five years, my junior, right? And so, part of it was like, 'Well, who am I going to be conversing with, if I were to do that?' And just kind of waiting for art history to kind of catch up. But then, also, something that I experienced, Caitlin, at the time was I was often told, or it was recommended to me, that I could work on Latin American art or modern art of Latin America. At the time, I understood this as a conflation of my identity as a Latina with a research subject that I could potentially gain competence in. So, in this case, Latin American art, which is different than studying work by Latinx artists, born and raised in the United States. One can choose to work on subjects related to one's identity, but I think in my specific case, or in the wake of the first wave of identity politics in the 1990s, I didn't want to succumb to pressure to study work based on my ethnic identity. For Latin American art, there were really wonderful advances in curating in the 1990s and even in the 80s [that] really put modern and contemporary art of Latin America on the map. So, while there might not have been professors at the institutions I attended wholly dedicated to that work, I can name Luis Pérez Oramas, Monica Amore, people who are doing that work and curating shows at the time that were references for me. So, it wasn't like this totally desert field, just the time lag between its institutional curatorial appearance and then it's insertion within modernist art histories. There's almost 15 to 20 years in between that and it's in part because of this academic exclusion or lag. I went on to study with Hal Foster and I chose to work on postwar European art. At Princeton, I had the privilege of an intellectually diverse

committee that included Carol Armstrong, Brigid Doherty, and Branden Joseph, who was there as a postdoc at the time. And working with Hal, I always knew that the work I produced needed to be good, and not necessarily that I needed to become an expert in his research subjects. I never felt any pressure in that way that I would need to mirror the areas and or even the methodology that he turns to. So, what I learned from Hal and my committee, [was] how to ask key questions of my research material, and each of them impacted my critical thinking in different ways, whether I was working on modern art or on film. After my defense-- and I went from Princeton to Columbia--Branden continued to be an important interlocutor and has remained so. So, in terms of how I began to be interested in film--so I mean, this is maybe not quite answering your question-- but when I began at Yale, in addition to Kellie Jones, Noa Steimatsky was teaching film at Yale at the time, and I took her seminar on the face in film and when I ended up transferring to Princeton, she told me to, without a doubt, reach out to P. Adams Sitney, and take a class with him. And I ended up TA-ing for him, but then in the course of doing my research on les nouveaux réalistes, one of the first books I read was actually about lettrist film, which was so exciting, but I was like, 'Oh, I can't deal with this now, I have to deal with this at another time.' But I often think of that lettrist book as almost a prequel to the myth of nouveau réalisme written in reverse order. But art history moves slowly and at the time in the late 90s, early 2000s, even postwar European art wasn't really being taught. If you were to take 1945 to the present survey, it would go from abstract expressionism, Neo dada, pop, minimalism, institutional critique to the present. And so, the 50s is this moment in Europe, which had just suffered the destruction of World War II, the holocaust, all of this was not really part of the narrative. I mean, it was really triumphal in terms of abstract expressionism and a postwar United States genealogy of artistic production. So, even in working on the new book--at least at the time--it didn't feel to me that I was contributing to reinscribing the dominant narrative. There's still, I think, much to be said about the postwar European context and how artists cope with the aftermath of the war through aesthetic production.

Caitlin Woolsey

Your interest in film and media [did] that arise from those experiences in graduate school or sort of how...?

Kaira M. Cabañas

Oh, yes, for sure. If I had more time, I think I would dedicate more time to film. But film takes time. A lot of time. And I lived very close to Anthology Film Archives, so it was like my living room, I would go there and go see films and it didn't matter what it was, I would just go. It was a wonderful resource that I wish I lived closer to to learn about film, also kind of in an informal way, I would say, not unlike how I learned about modern art of Latin America. I guess there's a lot of self-taught in me too--in all of us, basically.

Caitlin Woolsey

I'm interested too in hearing you speak perhaps a little bit about how the question of media has kind of carried throughout your different projects and your different lines of research in terms of questions of the medium as an atmosphere or as a framework, and how the writing of art history intersects with these questions of media broadly understood, not just as the kind of technological apparatus but these other more effusive or unruly ways of thinking about media.

Kaira M. Cabañas

Sure. So, I find so I find it curious...I mean, yes, I just was talking about film, but I don't really think of myself as particularly interested in media, which is perhaps surprising or not surprising. I mean, your own work, you're writing on Henri Chopin, so I can see potential resonances, but I think maybe more the question of atmosphere [or] framework...you know, when I was working on lettrist film I became really obsessed with the history of the film club as a space in which there was a time when somebody would introduce the film live and then there would be a debate and how this intellectual sociability within what--what is now a very popular medium, right, a film--became the material of lettrist films. This ability--or a way to think of film beyond the filmstrip, per se, but as a social practice--was for me to think about how to practice film otherwise. And so, I think in terms of building a bridge because--I think that you used the word 'capacious'--and set early work on lettrist film, it finds a kind of resonance in *Learning from Madness*, which is about a different problematic, particularly when I talk about Javier Téllez and Alejandra Vieira's work and how they both work and use film and collaborate with psychiatric patients. But in so doing, they challenge our assumptions of both cinema and mental health. So, I think there's a way in which working on this question of how to practice film otherwise, as it was instantiated within lettrist film--in large measure, as a way of undoing the

way that speech was hijacked during World War II, in terms of propaganda--has an afterlife in this other work, which deals with the problematic that I'm most close to now, in terms of the intersections between art and psychiatry.

Caitlin Woolsey

I'd love to hear you speak a little bit more about some of these more recent projects, how you arrived at these at these topics.

Kaira M. Cabañas

I think this is a way to address how everything comes together and perhaps also account for why I keep returning to the word capacious. There's not really another word to describe what might seem like an ad hoc amalgamation of random interests. The project that actually unites all these different let's say, research foci is really *Specters of Artaud: Language and the Arts in the 1950s*, which was the exhibition I curated with experimental musician and composer Frederic Acquaviva--who you who you also know. That exhibition was an opportunity for me to bring together in a single project various scholarly interests and objectives by tracking Artaud's reception, and how it intersected with the rise of interdisciplinary practices in various locations. So, the exhibition triangulated, Paris, Black Mountain, and Rio de Janeiro, and also some artistic practices in São Paulo as well. It was really about tracing an idea across geographies, rather than having geography be the limit or boundary within which thought or artistic practice takes place or is defined. It's almost like to have geography be a limit when the world is constituted from migrations is to impose a kind of artificiality to the space time in which art takes place. So, the exhibition in that regard included lettrism; included artistic practices going [on] around John Cage's 1952, Untitled event, which is often considered the first happening; and then concrete and neo concrete art, both poetry and the visual arts as part of it. But it also, as an exhibition, tracked Artaud's critical and clinical reception. So, I think here's where then we have the kind of pivot to art and psychiatry in my work, and I will tell an anecdote [that] I think clarifies this move. So, *Specters of Artaud* for me was an unexpected invitation. It was Manuel Borja the director of Reina Sofia, he asked. So, I said to him in a meeting that I thought somebody should do a retrospective of lettrism and his response was, 'Well, do you want to do that?' And I was like, 'Well, let me get back to you.' I didn't really see myself as wanting to do a retrospective on lettrism, not because that doesn't need to be done in a very thorough way, but as an intellectual project...I just didn't see myself doing a retrospective. It just [didn't] seem to be how I would

want to approach the opportunity to actually do an exhibition. So, I put a proposal together about Artaud and language and outlined these three geographic sites that I thought Artaud's presence was important to think about and track and when I proposed this to him, then he's like, 'Well, you really need an epilogue, and you should do the living theater as the epilogue.' Then I just was silent. And then it was another, 'oh, well, let me get back to you.' But the thing is with Manuel it's super rigorous. So, I needed to come back with an alternative that was compelling and not just...I just also didn't see myself in [that] way for different reasons. I didn't see myself doing a retrospective of the lettrist movement and I didn't see myself--in terms of my intellectual interests--being reinforced working on the living theater. So, I called my friend and colleague Jorge [inaudible] and I remember this scene very vividly. I was in Paris, and I was somewhat in distress with the suggestion because it didn't resonate with me and so Jorge, who's worked with Manolo for a long time was like, 'why don't you do something related to radical psychiatry?' This must have been in 2011. So, then I was like, 'okay, yes, I can do that. That's something I am interested in, that has come up in my research tangentially, I can absolutely do this.' So, that ended up being my counterproposal was to do an epilogue about Artaud's clinical reception in terms of the fact [that] Artaud returns to drawing in the clinical context, he was in various psychiatric institutions over the course of eight years subjected to electroshock--horrible--but you have material that deals with radical psychiatry that includes the lettrists and Isidore Isou. They have an entire therapeutic program that they develop in the wake of May '68 and Isou's internment in Sainte-Anne. And you have Lygia Clark also exposed to anti psychiatric proposals and radical psychiatry also in the same years in Paris, because she's in Paris, it's her second residence. So, this was really productive to think about. That's kind of amazing that you have Isidore Isou and Lygia Clark in the same city at the same time thinking about mental health and the psychiatric institution. So, that became then the epilogue to the Artaud exhibition. When I was doing the research for *Specters of Artaud*, I learned that actually he was first read in Rio in the psychiatric context. So, it was Nise da Silveira who was reading Artaud in the late 40s and around that same time [inaudible name] was also reading Artaud and in searching for Artaud's ghosts I found these links between Artaud's receptions, psychiatric patients, art in Brazil, and geometric abstraction. This is then what consolidated the move to develop what was the third section of the exhibition on Brazil and geometric abstraction and think about the convergences and divergences of art and psychiatry and their discourses, relating to artistic practice and creativity. That culminated in *Learning from Madness*,

which was basically to show how the creative work of psychiatric patients was claimed as art in Brazil and exhibited in modern art venues as early as the 1930s. This is a key discontinuity for me between Europe and Brazil in relation to the history of the visual arts produced within asylums. Some of that early work of Nise da Silveira's patients was also exhibited in *Specters of Artaud* but mostly in the context of documents and a film by Leon Kirschman that is almost like a slideshow of various works by the patients. I think that what accounts for the varied interests and how they were channeled into different books, I think *Specters of Artaud* really provides that logic, both in terms of the problematic, right in terms of the turn toward art and psychiatry, but also the particular geographic sites that my work engages.

Caitlin Woolsey

You mentioned a few times in the course of your research surfacing these connections, and I would be curious to hear you reflect a little bit on what role the archive plays in your work?

Kaira M. Cabañas

My first job in art history was for the Archives of American Art. I think in the way that I had no idea in high school what art history, or the humanities was, as an undergrad I didn't really know what an archive was until I worked at the Archives of American Art and was able to go through their file cabinets of things and became totally enamored with what it means to go through people's personal papers or records. I'm very committed to archival research. I don't think that digitizing archives supplants doing research on the site. I think we can think of two ways of thinking about the archive, the actual--and this is Foucauldian of me to say, but--there's the actual archive where all those documents are housed, and then there's the archive of what can, or is not, said. Dominant art history has its own archive. Its methodology is an archive, some things are within the method allowed in and others remain external to it. When you go to the actual physical archive, for me it's like what might seem insignificant to the dominant archive of art history, if I make that have a central role, how does that shift the contours of the archive of what can be said within art history? And that also has to do with going to a place and speaking the language and speaking with people, and then all of a sudden, you realize, well, actually, the way art history is practiced in Brazil is not the way it's practiced in the US and artists who in the US might be aligned with performance art are not considered performance artists in Brazil. So, there's a way that we need to be thinking about archives in this

multifaceted way. At the same time, yes, I like being on the ground. I like the challenges and they are sometimes seemingly insurmountable in Brazil about how to get to or actually get the little piece of paper or the letter from Dubuffet that I want that I know was sent but I don't have the original. I just go on this almost detective quest to unearth things and in that I've been lucky. There's this psychoanalyst, Flavia Corpas, and I think she must have the same spirit of detective uncovering of clues because I remember once we were in this search for this one photograph and then she ended up finding it. That's very gratifying and even if it might not change what you initially think going into a project, I do think that in the way that the art object resists being assimilated to language the document will cause resistances to what you think was maybe going on and then you're looking at it and you're like, 'Oh, well, actually, no, it's different.' So, it entails a type of close looking that I think art objects also ask of us, as well. So, I love archives. I love archives.

Caitlin Woolsey

I would love to hear you speak about if there's certain texts that are important.

Kaira M. Cabañas

Again, it's not self-evident. I think that's what I kind of enjoy most about it. When I was a grad student, Judith Butler was really key to my thinking and her work on the politics of speech, but in my graduate courses--and I think that there's always this distinction between like what I was most impressed by but then actually what ends up being most visible in the work I do--I was most impressed by Leo Bersani's Freudian body and intimacies when I was a grad student, but these works aren't reflected in my research in any immediate or legible way, except I did use intimacies or *proximidades* as the title of the book I edited on Brazilian artist Laercio Redondo's work. I don't read much art history, except for when I'm teaching, but within art history the two books that I've most admired and learned from recently were Georges Didi-Huberman's *Survival of the Fireflies* and Darby English's *To Describe a Life*. So, I think this--in some sense--might, take us back to the question of care because even though it might seem totally contradictory, Didi-Huberman and Darby English, they appeal to me in different but similar ways. So, I don't know if you've read *Survival of the Fireflies*, but it's a wonderful text that unites fireflies, Pasolini, homoerotic desire, and contrasts the excessive light of fascism with the fleeting and threatened light and life of fireflies. This text for me was the most beautiful and so now every time I see a firefly, I have this like almost more than magical moment. This is what I love. It's

more than magical, but also vulnerable moments of appearance. Fireflies are disappearing, we need to care for them. In Darby's book, he discusses this composure, which is about blurring the black, white divide that pervades the dominant discourse in the US, but he also addresses the vulnerability of what he calls 'thin knowing.' So, there he departs from a poem by Kay Ryan, and, for me, this question of thin knowing is also part of the tenuousness of what it means to produce knowledge and I think that it has to do in some way with fireflies. There's something about the kind of nuance, the tenuousness, the vulnerability, that we can think about thin knowing and fireflies in the same thought, and that be productive. But my old friend, my all-time moved-to-tears text, was Serge Deney's *The Tracking Shot in Kapo*. This is one of those moments. I remember I was in the Getty archive. I don't remember what I was reading, and I started weeping. I was probably waiting for my archival materials to arrive. Then I was reading this printout of Deney's *Tracking Shot in Kapo* and sometimes I joke that it was probably [due] to the lack of oxygen in the Getty. Those rooms they're like airtight. So, I'm reading *The Tracking Shot in Kapo* and really just start crying. There he talks about an alternative education--how he would go to the local cinemathèque and learn about film as his parallel education to what you would learn in the classroom. This is beautiful and something I always also tell my students because the expectation can't be that I will teach them everything. They have to also figure out what their desires to know are and to do that parallel education. The conceit that I, as a single person, even in the context of one class on one specific subject, would be able to satisfy my students' desire to know...I mean, there's some responsibility for people to also have that alternative education. This was very important for me in terms of Deney's texts, but also in that text, he talks about his refusal to see a film, so he's not implicated in the type of viewing it requires. He's talking about a film in which there's a moment of the aestheticization of death at a concentration camp. That part--in terms of the ethics of seeing and refusing to see--was a moving account for me of how you might not be able to change the world, but you can always say no--like "Am I going to watch that?" "No"--because of how it might position you as a subject at the moment of viewing. With all of that--from Didi-Huberman to Darby to Serge Deney--I think it's not just the subject of those books--and of course, Judith Butler, as well-- its' not just the subjects of the books that moved me but how they were written. Writing is always a struggle. So, they serve as inspiration for me as well, and the type of care I think that comes across in those texts.

Caitlin Woolsey

I would love to talk a little bit more about your book *Imminent Vitalities* that just came out this year.

Kaira M. Cabañas

In part, *Imminent Vitalities* was--and this comes across most in the introduction--written to go against the...well, first it takes as its point of departure the new materialisms that emerged in the early 2000s as a way of rethinking agency and the agency of a material object and material practice and thinking about how art could serve as a fitting model for thinking through such entanglements, particularly of materiality and subjectivity in the work of artists from and related to Latin America. So, it's very much a theoretical approach and, in part, it was to go against an implicit academic bias that when one writes about modern [and] contemporary art of Latin America, one needs to provide more cultural context. If you write on Euro-American modernist art histories, you can be purely theoretical. So, you can write a theoretically, idea-driven book on let's say, Andy Warhol, but when it comes to Lygia Clarke, you'll be asked to talk more about Brazil in order to legitimate her works' meaning. There are ways in which I've talked about this in different contexts as a double burden. In the US, we take as given that English-speaking readers will know the context in which Andy Warhol, for example, is producing his work and we will then ask that more unpacking be done when it comes to artists from other regions. So, I aligned this in the introduction to *Imminent Vitalities*. I described it as a type of blackmail. There I was referencing Yve-Alain Bois's wonderful introduction to *Painting as Model*, which I really recommend people to go back and read, when she talks about the various types of biases and blackmail that occur in academia. So, this was a particular type of blackmail--that art from Latin America can only have meaning if you speak of it in a geopolitical frame--seems to also confer on it different requirements in terms of methodology, but also [the] theoretical purchase it might have on modern and contemporary art as such. And this relates to when we began speaking. In part, my own experience from undergrad to the present with, I experienced unease with concepts like sub discipline, or center periphery. I first encountered center periphery in the 90s as an undergrad and to continually use these terms to me reinscribes hierarchies that would be preferably displaced. This might be a generational response on my part, but I remember once a colleague asking me to acknowledge that there is a sub discipline of modern Latin American art, and I totally resisted. I was like, 'that

situates the production in a lesser kind of sub place.' The book is already in a series on Latin American art, and I remember the editor asking me to have Latin American art in the title and I'm like, 'why am I going to put Latin American art in the title? It's already in the name of the series.' So, there's that. But in terms of my approach, *Imminent Vitalities* tracks the kind of entanglements of materiality and subjectivity from a semi-autonomous modern art to more contemporary artistic projects, and it focuses on select cases in Brazil and Venezuela. So, I don't have competence in all 23--sometimes 30 depending on how one counts them--countries in Latin America. So, it's very specific, in terms of what I'm looking at, but also wanting it to be specific and complex and nuanced so that something is revealed about the artistic practices, but that through proposing imminent vitalities as a theoretical frame, it also has a kind of broader intellectual theoretical purchase that might be useful for somebody working on other aspects of modern and contemporary art. And that I think also obtains in--and even other works like the myth of nouveau réalisme--the operative concept there is performative realism. So, for me, yes, you can learn a lot about postwar France, but you can also think about how performativity and realism converge to displace referentiality. That might be useful for somebody writing in a context that is not specific to postwar France even though I'm very careful to be attentive to the discontinuities and differences.

Caitlin Woolsey

What is your sense of where things are at today within the discipline?

Kaira M. Cabañas

Last year I taught a graduate seminar. It was a curatorial seminar. So, I taught the history of various exhibitions and I taught Kirk Varnedoe's text, which is his response to the criticism of the MoMA modern art and primitivism show. This text is from 1984. When I read in Varnedoe's, text, something along the lines of, 'the discipline of art history is felt to be in crisis,' I was reminded of how I heard similar statements in graduate school. And I always asked myself, Caitlin, a crisis for who? Like, who's the surprises for? To me, it doesn't seem like a crisis in art history, [but] a crisis for a privileged subject position, who could write art history and determine which art histories count. So, I'm always struck by--and I think we need to maybe own sometimes--the historical paradox of how one art historian's crisis is another's achievement. So, how is it that women, LGBTQ, and people of color were and are writing art history, and just as those histories of artistic production and those are the global South are reconfiguring art history from

within...? For me, this is an accomplishment, this is not a crisis. It's an opportunity to include other voices in all art historical fields, from ancient to contemporary, and to basically learn approaches that might have us consider the limits, biases, and naturalized assumptions of the discipline as we know it. I say this, in part, because I feel that sometimes I'm just living in this circle. Like how is it that I went through the 90s and these same conversations are coming back today? And like, why are some people condemned to this circularity and others just move forward? And all of this--I think we might have talked about this in another conversation--in part prompted me to choose to retire from art history and my response to my retirement from art history has meant different things for me, but I will narrate this, in part, and take this interview as an opportunity. Basically, last year it was in September, I turned to my partner Jesus and I said, 'I'm retiring for art history, I don't know what that will mean, in practice.' And he looks at me rather quizzically--nobody takes me seriously because I don't joke about such things. And then I even confirmed the following to my students in Seminar the following week, the students in the same curatorial seminar in which we had read the Kirk Varnedoe text. I'm like, 'I retired from art history.' And, I told them, 'Duchamp retired from art, but I don't play chess, so I don't know what I'm going to do.' I read from notes about how we seem to be living in a moment, which art doesn't matter, and art's being asked to do other things. It's being asked to answer pre-formulated questions and offer ready-made answers or to serve as an illustration of a sociological reality. So, this question of the circularity of the crisis--and not the crisis of the discipline, but let's just say that it's the crisis of particular subject positions, or gatekeepers are being displaced, however, we want to describe that--is it really a crisis in the discipline? And then I'm also ill at ease with what I what I find to be the increasingly visible performative contradiction of scholars who will declare a decolonial intention, but continue and by and large, impose Western ideas on the quote, unquote, foreign object. So, this is also something else that I don't quite...the kind of the declaration of a certain politics, but the actual practice of something that's an imposition is, to me, a contradiction that is not sustainable, it's not ethically sustainable. I also don't like the talk of the limits of art history because I think art history has a lot to offer and that we have a wonderful opportunity in the present for what art history can do.

Caitlin Woolsey

And within this new phase of perhaps greater freedom in your own orientation to the discipline...

Kaira M. Cabañas

I wrote this article called "Caring for Butterflies" and it takes as its point of departure Aby Warburg's psychosis. And of course, you know, Warburg is foundational to the discipline, but few art historians talk about [the fact] that he had a psychotic break and developed and performed his famous serpent ritual lecture while still in a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland. So, for me, in this text, "Caring for Butterflies," I kind of situate his intellectual labor and art history lecture with slides within the occupational therapy program that was actually part of the clinic's therapeutic community. So, for me, I want to ask, what does it mean for Warburg's lecture or art history practice as a form of therapy, to be a condition of possibility for thinking the pursuit and scholarly outcomes of art historical interpretation? So, what does it mean to begin to think of art history as therapeutic? Part of this was to answer Georges Didi-Huberman. In 1998, he actually posed this question. So now--this is 23 years ago that he asked--is art history prepared to recognize that one of their foundational scholars was someone who spent five years in mental institutions, who was speaking to butterflies for long hours on end, and his doctor thought that he would never be cured? So, I situate Warburg within this therapeutic community, which included a farm, art and music, and sports facilities, as well as the garden where he spoke to the butterflies. For me, this is to think about art as a form of care, and art history as a form of care, and to think about the network of relations that allow for art, but also art historical practice to emerge. So, the Warburg is, in part, a point of departure for thinking about art history as a discipline and also, provides the point of departure for my next project, which is tentatively titled, "Deviant Histories, Radical Psychiatry, and Art as Creative Care." It's more about the role that art and artists have played in international calls for asylum reform in the 20th century. It's to look at art in totally different conditions. Like, how is psychiatric treatment that uses the visual arts or aesthetic experimentation as part of its care...what does that reveal about not only psychiatric care, but also how art can make visible in some instances, the politics of psychiatric reform. What I love about art history, even with my retirement, is that it is a supple, rigorous at its best, ethical practice, and bestows care on the objects it studies, even the butterflies, even the butterflies.

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.

