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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"GROUNDED BY A SET OF RELATIONS": NANCY UM ON "HORIZONTAL" CULTURES WITHIN ART HISTORY

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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, I speak with Nancy Um, professor of art history at Bennington University in New York state, whose research explores the Islamic world from the perspective of the coast and around the rims of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Nancy describes her experience of conducting fieldwork in Yemen and reflects on the constraints of focusing on an area marked by geopolitical instability. She recounts her decision to focus on the bodies of water instead of territories and how this approach destabilizes some of the traditional organizing principles of the discipline that allows her to pursue global art history on a local scale. Finally, she considers digital art history as a site of access, and as part of a dynamic approach to her own work changing over time.

Nancy Um
So it's interesting to think about the reconfiguration of who one is, based on the exigencies of the research.

Caro Fowler
Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Nancy. It's really nice having you here.

Nancy Um
It's great to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

Caro Fowler
I would just really be curious to know, what led you to studying Islamic architecture at UCLA? How did you become interested in Islamic architecture as a field and a discipline and a career path?

Nancy Um
Sure. Well, this story is kind of my origin story in some ways. Junior year I did my study abroad semester at the American University of Cairo. That was a turning point for me. Cairo was this vibrant, exhausting, exciting city that was unlike any

city I'd ever been to. I was particularly captivated by the old city of Cairo--this idea that you had all of this living heritage, this monumental living heritage, that's really integrated into the modern living city. So, I spent all of my free time in Cairo in those monuments. And I knew that I wasn't ready to stop. I didn't know exactly what was going to happen and where I was going to go from there, but I just kept on going after that. I ended up in California, which was--you know...I'm an East Coast person, so that was that. I don't know maybe LA was more foreign to me than Cairo was, but it was a good place for me. A lot of things have happened in my life and my career were really kind of accidental. I went from one thing to the other. I never had this sense of where I want to go. But I knew I couldn't stop. That was what pushed me forward.

Caro Fowler
I can imagine. When was the last time you were in Cairo?

Nancy Um
So, this is the sad story. That was 1991. You can do the math to figure out how long that...30 years now, right? It's been that long since I've been to Cairo. So, I never went back there. But of course, I picked up research in other places that also ended up [inaudible] too. That's a kind of a different story.

Caro Fowler
That does bring us to my next question, which is in my own experience of being an art historian, there is no preparation for fieldwork or going abroad or working in archives. You mentioned that as well. I can imagine [that] it's only more intensified for an architectural historian who's on the ground dealing with ground plans and buildings and archives. So, I'd be very curious to hear what was it like for you when you first arrived in Yemen? Am I correct that Yemen was where you cut your teeth in terms of architectural groundwork? What was it like when you arrived in Yemen? And how did you navigate and how did you learn that set of skills on your own?

Nancy Um
Well, first of all, I'm really glad to hear that your experience echoed mine, that I'm not alone in this critique. I think that there is--to even pull this back a little bit--a larger critique across the humanities--definitely among art historians, but also across the humanities--about the way in which we engage in doctoral training. I think the very true and wide-reaching critique that most of the things

that art historians actually do…we train them for--ourselves and each other--to do very little of what we actually do. The most common critique is that so many of us spend most of our time teaching in the classroom and we spend the least amount of time preparing students to actually do that part of their career, which is such a major part of the work they do. So, the critique is really just thinking about doctoral education on a larger scope. In terms of architectural field work, I was lucky in that I did have that experience in Cairo. So, I knew how to look at a historical building and what to do when I got in one, and what to photograph. That was really fortunate because I don't think that everyone who kind of gets dropped into the field necessarily has that experience. So, I drew on that. But [inaudible] there's just so many things that I wasn't prepared for. For instance, I really did not understand how to work with ruins. Of course, I arrived at my field site all excited. This was the port city of Mocha on the Red Sea. [I was] ready to document the city, [only] to find everything was completely destroyed. So, I might have been able to work and there were a few standing monuments that I did work with intensively, but I didn't know what to do with all these ruins, these mounds of bricks on the ground. There was no preparation for that. The question of access is a huge one. It's one that I think we treat as just as contingency, but it affects what kind of work you can do. It was interesting because I ended up working on domestic architecture. That made sense for my site because there was a really interesting tradition of vernacular building that people hadn't looked at, not just in the city of Mocha, but across, up, and down the Red Sea. So, that that was very fortuitous. Because I was a woman, I was able to go into houses and spend time with families. And it was very interesting when I'd be traveling with some of my male colleagues and--not surprising[ly]--the families would tell me 'you can come in, but that guy, he's gotta stay outside.' I saw this [and] I realized this opening that I had, but I hadn't planned that, it was fortuitous. Of course, the time that I spent in those houses was so important because it helped me to understand the functional patterns that they allow. So, that whole question of access, I think, is really, really important. If I had kind of naively decided I wanted to do a dissertation on religious architecture, as a non-Muslim, I would not have had access to those sites. So, these kinds of things that are treated as secondary are so absolutely key to our intellectual questions. And no one also told me that whenever you go out to any expedition outside of the capital city of Sana'a, Yemen that you have to go under military convoy. So, the idea of working, first of all, with the team--I don't think any of us are trained about how we work with each other even in basic collaboration--working with a

team was something that I had no experience with, but working with a team that included, you know, military...

Caro Fowler
How does a graduate student even hire a military convoy to leave the city?

Nancy Um
So, it's interesting because for anyone who works outside of Sana'a--which many of us did--whenever we'd leave the capital, you get out to certain checkpoints, and no one can leave those checkpoints without leaving the convoy. So, those were during the days when research was very open. And yeah, I did not realize when I was there in the 90s, in the early 2000s, that that was a great time to be working there. Of course, now, none of that is possible. I didn't understand that the situation would deteriorate so quickly. So, that was when things were easy. I would say that was when things were the most promising for researchers. So, there were those challenges that that I wasn't prepared for at all. One could say as well that you can't prepare a graduate student for all of that, certainly, but I do think having more intensive conversations--for all of us, maybe--just doing a better job of communicating the whole experience of what it means to be an art historian. I just feel like I wish that I had heard more of that before I went out in the field and before I got my first tenure track job and before I did so many of the things that I was charged with doing, rather than just kind of figuring it out on the ground.

Caro Fowler
One of the things you've talked about as a "hidden curriculum" in art history--and fieldwork is one of these--but, but there are other things too. I was wondering if you could kind of expand on that? [What] are some of the other things that you feel aren't necessarily transparently conveyed within graduate education that that one has to catch up with?

Nancy Um
This idea of hidden curriculum in art history is something that I don't think we talk about. We talk about it behind closed doors, [but] we don't normally talk about in the space of the seminar room, or I don't hear it discussed or taken up in our sessions in CA. And to me, that's like the substance, right? The questions of what it means and what it takes to embark on, but also sustain a career as an academic, and particularly in the field of art history. So, questions for me--and,

again, some curricula, I think were very much oriented around museum practices--of, for instance, understanding how collections are put together in museums. With archives, of course, I did jump into archives without any training in paleography or without anyone sitting down with me and telling me, 'this is the strategy that we use to put together a finding aid.' So I'd use the finding aid, but I didn't really understand what this document was and what its logic was. I think those kinds of questions are really, really important. And then there's all of those kinds of social expectations that we have. And people say, 'Oh, well, you never do that, or you don't do that, or this is professional, that's not professional.' And of course, there's an implicit elitism in a lot of those expectations. And I will say that once you get into that world, it takes a lot to interrogate them. In this way, I think I've drawn on a lot of younger scholars who have helped me to deconstruct what I accepted implicitly as the way we work, as just the way it's done. So, I think that turning to some of these critical voices, these emerging voices, is really, really important. I think a lot of times in academia, we fall upon these patterns of, who do you turn to? And it's inevitably going to be that you turn to the most senior person in your field, you draw on their experience. It's this kind of hierarchical idea of mentorship. It's long standing and it's really not interrogated. But what if we were to look at mentorship networks that were maybe vertical in the other direction--being [inaudible] by junior scholars, emerging scholars, and graduate students who actually need to tell us what they are experiencing? We need to listen, as well, to really understand the changing shape of the field that I don't think all of us have reckoned with because things are happening fast. The scholarly landscape is changing. So, I think that's a really important question. And it's one that I came to understand really late. After I had trained myself to understand and [after having] internalized that hidden curriculum and trying and having to hold myself back from reproducing those expectations of others.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, it's true. It does seem like there's a way in which...at least when I was in graduate school, I think what you're saying in terms of finding a senior mentor, I wasn't even really necessarily aware of that and the ways in which it is so social. Because I think you spend so much time alone reading and writing and you're meant to produce a singular document with singular ideas, [but] the social aspects of it, the ways in which so many things happen out of friendships or collaborative projects or conversations at conferences, I think I was completely oblivious to so much of that. It does seem like now there's another possible

model emerging in which younger scholars who are more engaged in collaborative projects or who are more engaged in supporting one another or supporting even more junior scholars is allowing for a different kind of sociality in art history, maybe that doesn't depend on this model of someone younger really depending upon someone older and more senior to write them letters and to help them secure a career--I would hope--because that model does not seem to be sustainable.

Nancy Um
Yeah, I absolutely agree. And I think a lot of people who are senior to me will say, 'I don't know how to necessarily advise someone on how to get a first book contract in this environment,' even if that person has published seven books, because they were operating under such different circumstances, a completely different world of academic publishing. So, what I ended up doing--and again, this was not by design, it was just because I didn't necessarily find those senior mentors--[was] building a network for myself that was much more about people who were at the same stage that I was at. And it's interesting because then you kind of move up the ranks together and then you provide the support for each other. That has been so valuable for me. So, thinking about a horizontal network of mentoring that can be equally as powerful as those more hierarchical ones, I think is really important to remind people of and then also to think about the empowerment of definitely emerging scholars who have embraced new forms of scholarly expression, who have--some of them--just incredible profiles on social media and huge followings, and are able to send messages that reach completely different and definitely much bigger audiences than those of us who are still publishing in very traditional means can. Of course, we've got to get to a place in which we understand what kind of validity that work should receive, and I think we're definitely far from that right now, but I'm really enthusiastic. I'm excited by those voices. I think that they see, in general, that collaboration is key. Again, I came to collaboration really late in my career, right after I finished my first book and when I first started to kind of co-edit things with people who I had affinities with. And, again, not having received any mentorship about what it means to collaborate and how you find a partner, what makes a good partner. Because a good partner is not always someone who you share intellectual interests with. It might be about communication modes, how and how often you want to respond to emails and how often you want to consult with each other. Those kinds of things that I think are so important. So, sometimes I worry that I get too process oriented or practical, but I just love these conversations about the way we work

today and kind of taking stock of what that really looks like because I don't think we've accepted some of the changes that the field, I think, is barreling forward toward. Some of us, I think, are kind of dragging our feet on a little bit or maybe have our heads in the sand. I know that there have been periods where I've definitely had my head in the sand like that.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, well it's hard because even though individuals are barreling forward towards this, I think also such a large part of this is the critique of the instability currently in doing a PhD in the humanities--the lack of jobs, the lack of infrastructure within art history departments and museums to support the amount of PhDs that are currently coming out--and so I think bundled up with all this is also a lot of critique about current infrastructure that I think, understandably, no one person or department or even collective can necessarily figure out.

Nancy Um
Yeah, and I think you know I have been working on this project with these dissertations and I don't want to kind of jump over to that, but it's relevant, because there just was this moment in which I looked at that dissertation roster that CAA has published now 60 years, right? And I first went there to ask some very pointed questions. And I kind of saw it as what I'll call a structured data set because it has this format that is consistent and I knew that if I were to apply some kind of analysis to it, interpretation to it, I would just begin to see patterns. Patterns that I think I've sensed. I think we've all sensed, but we never saw really kind of quantified or concretized in any way.

Caro Fowler
Historiography by numbers. Is that what you call it?

Nancy Um
I kind of use some different terms. I talked about it as a kind of descriptive statistics. You never hear that in art history. But, yeah, so that's what [inaudible] spinning out, like it started off very small and then continued to build and we have a new piece that's coming out that I co-authored with Emily Hagen, who is a PhD student at Penn State. We just want to make sure that we all understand what the structure has looked like if you're asking really basic questions like, where are the major sites of production of knowledge? Meaning the major sites

where PhDs have been generated in the US and Canada. And, again, I think we know that, but we haven't kind of seen it put out in clear terms and you have questions like, what does it mean to be a prolific advisor? Does that mean advising five students or ten students or twenty? It turns out it's more like seventy.

Caro Fowler
To learn Linda Nochlin was the most prolific advisor over the past century. Is that correct?

Nancy Um
From our analysis, yes, but not just the most prolific, the most prolific by two-fold. I mean, that was what was so amazing. By our calendars, I think about 64 students, that we know [inaudible] but that's not complete accounting. Others who had very huge cadres of students, they were advising, thirty or forty, or even twenty. There is actually a very small number of individuals who advise at least twenty dissertations. So, it just gives you a sense to kind of think about these superlatives that we use all the time. Quantifying them is not a way of pinning them down. It's just a way of understanding, what does this look like, if we just put it out a different way? In some ways that project was meant to do a lot of things, but also artistry has a kind of non-congenial relationship with numbers and with quantitative methods. So, this whole question of, what our relationship digital humanities will be moving forward. It will be a rocky one, and it should be, right? Because we're always going to be trying to seek out subtlety between some of these kinds of measures, but I think one must also realize that when you're working with these kinds of quantitative expressions, you don't use them because you think that they are iron clad, as opposed to the softer forms of reasoning that humanities scholars normally use, [but] they're just another soft form of reasoning. You put out all these other kinds of interpretations that are textured in these ways, and problematic in these various ways, and so I've been thinking a lot about this question about the structure mainly of doctoral education, about art history, through that particular vehicle of that roster. It's just one place to look at what's happened with our field, what's happening with our field, and what its future might be.

Caro Fowler
Well, I was so struck when I saw the graphs and I saw that the year I finished my dissertation--2012--was this year in which there was this explosion of

dissertations, I think it might be the year in which there's the most dissertations finished, according to the data. It was so striking to me because I'd started my PhD right before the financial crisis and when we came in, there were all these jobs, and everyone was getting jobs. I was at Princeton and they had these fancy, open bar, cocktail parties. And then 2008 happened and the parties stopped and the jobs dried up and it was just so interesting to see that no one had ever said to me, for a complex, interlocking set of reasons, 'Oh, you can't get a job because you finished your dissertation in this period in which there are all these PhDs coming out [and] still recovering from a financial crisis.' So, it was interesting to see to see it pictorially presented, I would have to say.

Nancy Um
Yeah, the editors at CAA reviews that we've been working with have been really terrific. They wanted us to draw further conclusions, like 'that drop is definitely related--I'm certain--to that moment and what happens after 2008.' We didn't go that far because we figured we'd put it out and have colleagues do with it what they what they want to do with it and make up what they will and hopefully take it further. But you can definitely see that this peak and then a fall and it's interesting because we did not crunch the data for 2019 [and 20]20, but the numbers drop a great deal, actually, from 2019--which may have been also because reporting was during COVID. So that will be part of it as well. But then the question is, what kind of other stuff [are we] slow? Where do we plateau? Do we come back up again? I really don't know, but I do want to know. It's been interesting to look at how steep the trend line moves in both directions because we've run out of slope up until 2012 and [20]13, but it moved in the other direction, without question.

Caro Fowler
It's a great project. It's a really exciting project. Well, I'd like to change topics a little bit. You've also received recently this big Getty grant, Connecting Art Histories, with Prita Meier, which is really exciting, focused on...and you can speak better than I can about what it's focused on, but one thing that it draws me to is a question I had about your research. What I really appreciate about your research is your dedication to this one geographic area and the ways in which you expand these huge histories from it-- beyond Mocha or beyond the port city--and I think one of the reasons is that you've really thought about it oceanicly in terms of these bodies of water, both the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. So, I would be curious to hear both about the Getty project and how it came

about, but then also even more about what it means to you to be an architectural historian who's sited more in relationship to bodies of water instead of land perhaps, and then also kind of the specificity of these bodies of water, as opposed to, say, the Mediterranean, which is so ensconced within the discipline of art history?

Nancy Um
Yeah, thank you so much for taking us in that direction. So, I think the first thing to start out by saying--which is important to just ground us in what's changed over the past decades--is when I got started--so that was the 90s--we weren't talking about bodies of water the way that we do today. So, really, over this past twenty to thirty years, there's been a shift. I will say, historians in the 90s, definitely, were talking about the Indian Ocean, but in very different ways, than they do today. But art historians were not talking about that ocean, they were definitely talking about the Mediterranean, but not the Indian Ocean. So, there was a handful of us who were starting at that time to think about the Indian Ocean as a space of visual exchange and also understanding--particularly before the arrival of Europeans because there's such kind of uneven textual documentation--how important material culture is for the study of that particular body of water. So, there was Elizabeth Lambourn, who's in the UK; Alka Patel, who teaches at UC Irvine; me; Prita Meier, as well, and, all of us--if you think about the group, so Elizabeth and Alka were working really in the South Asian area, I was trained as an Islamicist, Prita as an Africanist--we're all, in some ways, saddled by the assumptions and the frameworks and the kind of patterns and habits of our own disciplines. Indian Ocean art history has always been kind of cobbled together between these fields, all of which, in many ways, sit at an edge of art history, as well, these kind of areas in the Global South. It's been really amazing to see--definitely within the past five years, but maybe within the past ten--how the Indian Ocean now is taken really quite seriously as an art historical space. That's pretty recent, and so that's exciting. Lots of company now. And I will say, it's gratifying to write because we've been trying to send out this message, but the question is, how do you do it? Admittedly, I started out with one foot firmly on--maybe even both feet firmly on--land by studying a port city in a particular place. The historian Francesca Trivellato speaks really beautifully about this idea of global history on a small scale. You take this unit, this port city, and through it you can understand this world of connections, and in some ways, that was as far as I was willing to go. The Indian Ocean is a big ocean. I'm not a good swimmer, I will tell you, as well, so I just

stayed on land at the beginning. But then it propelled me forward to begin to take on, admittedly, much more intrepid kinds of connections. Some of my recent pieces have been really itinerant, taking us from the mountains of Ethiopia all the way to the shores of Japan. For instance, I'm working on this piece right now about a Yemeni coin that was found in Rhode Island and, for me, North America, I'm like "oh no, this is really far afield." This coin was actually publicized a great deal a few months ago, and so I've been writing about that. What this has meant is really just destabilizing questions of the role that geography plays in art history. Of course, we're always so grounded within our spaces, and in our times, and so I feel remarkably grounded by a set of maritime relationships, but they have sent me into places that have been really unfamiliar. That's always the challenge of this kind of work. The other oceans have grounded us in terms of thinking about connection. I remember way back when, getting into grad school, when I first got into this, the only studies that I really had were ones like Deborah Howard's on the Mediterranean. Those were ones that gave me an inkling of what direction I could go and understanding that the Indian Ocean was going to pose different problems and different kinds of issues, just because of its scale, but also, you're dealing with places that are remarkably understudied--compared to the Mediterranean--and also under-documented. So, there's this kind of drawing from, but also understanding where you need to diverge from those traditions. And then the last thing I'll say about the Indian Ocean, is that it's a different corpus. You know, I'm trained as in Islamicist and I come out of that tradition, but my objects are not those objects that filled the touted halls of celebrated institutions. I don't have these beautiful pages from Persian manuscripts, these exquisite objects. I have things like old Dutch gin bottles and crates that used to hold clothes and very inexpensive coffee cups that may have come from afar but were not luxury items. So, that corpus is one that it's...I think it's more challenging to put forward because you have to do a little bit more work to explain its value. So those have been some of the challenges working with Indian Ocean. But I should also just say a few things about the Getty project. It's really a project that is focusing on bringing together a community of scholars who work on the Indian Ocean, but who are largely based around the Indian Ocean. I think this is a really important development in the field. There's a lot of really prominent amazing scholars who have a great platform who work from the US or from Europe. I think we all acknowledge that we play this outsized role that we don't deserve and that we want to hear more from colleagues who are based in Indian Ocean spaces. So, the Getty program is really about not only providing a platform for some of these scholars that might

allow them to have a wider audience outside of their regional communities, but also to connect them to each other. So, we have just selected our fifteen participants that come from ten different countries who do really amazing work across the ocean and we're going to convene them on Monday for the first time as a group. I've asked everyone…we have this presentation, I was just going to drop in a slide and we're going to all kind of work through our slides and introduce ourselves through a few images and objects. I'm really excited to kick it off. But I will say as well that the project was planned before COVID, so it was planned to be a travel project, and that's all still pending, how we're going to manage that international dimension. That dimension really hinged upon all of us moving together as a group from the Indian Ocean, around the Indian Ocean. I'm hoping that we can do that.

Caro Fowler
What are the specific historical circumstances within the Indian Ocean? As you articulated, it's emerged much more as a site of studying material culture than some of these other areas, what are those specific historic circumstances?

Nancy Um
Well, let me start by saying there is actually a critique that those of us who work on the Indian Ocean focus too much on trade. Okay, because there's lots of scholars who are very interested in religious connections and movements and law and other larger overarching issues, but the critique is that so many of us are really focused on trade. I'm definitely one of those people whose definitely focused on trade. And even if there is this often-repeated misconception that Indian Ocean trade was largely luxury trade--you hear that very often--it is not the case. There was lots of different kinds of goods that moved across our body of water, at a lot of levels mundane items--sacks of spices, ceramics, not all of which were these exemplars of porcelain production, for instance. A lot of times we're dealing with bulk goods that we know were fairly inexpensive items. Even those pieces of crock porcelain that arrived all the way in Amsterdam, these were not expensive items. They were mass produced. They were dashed off in many cases, in terms of their execution. And so, this, for me at least--I just speak for myself because, again, there's a lot of different impulses within the field, which is the exciting thing that's happening right now, lots of different new kinds of work, work that's overturning and critiquing their early work--but I came from a place--and this happens to be because I was working in the 90s when a lot of artists weren't thinking about the Indian Ocean, but historians were--[where] I

was responding to economic historians, who I would just kind of joke that you have a whole book about the trade of textiles, not a single picture in the book, first of all, and you have to tell this story, and it will be writing, they could tell you the price of a textile for every year of the 18th century, but if they were wearing that textile on their back, they would not necessarily recognize it. So, in some ways, my work was originally a kind of response to that work with just a simple proclamation that trade is a material process. These are things that are being exchanged, and even economic historians, especially economic historians, need to understand that physicality because it matters. It matters how the ship was packed because that had an impact on how much money you could actually make from your cargo. These kinds of tangible material aspects, very much drove me to respond to those economic historians in that way and I made the same critique with architecture saying you have all of this discussion about trade and economic systems, but where was the transaction happening? Like, where in the city? Where were they? Where were they sitting? These kinds of questions that, to me, seem so fundamental had never been asked. So, this is why we get into that mundane world of objects of trade, which were not luxury objects necessarily, as well as spaces of trade, which were not the monumental buildings. They happen to be more often the warehouse or the customs house, and unfortunate buildings that usually haven't lasted through time to the extent that their monumental counterparts have so. So that's why I'm grounded in the mundane, but there's been a lot of interesting work. I've been trying to engage in some of this as well on gift exchange, which kind of brings us into some very interesting objects. But those were quite unique exemplars behind remember that those were not constituting the bulk of the cargo that was carried.

Caro Fowler
I remember I was in Cochin for the first Cochin Biennale, and they hosted it within the old Dutch trade warehouses. They're never talked about in art history, but the local communities in Cochin were really thinking about how to take over these spaces and critique the trade that had formed the city, but it was just so interesting, as a historian when you are based in Amsterdam.

Nancy Um
You can imagine then for someone like me, who was trained as an Islamicist, and I chose this dissertation topic on Yemen, and I had studied Arabic which was my major language. Of course, in the in the field of Islamic, the languages that you know, or you learn are going to really delimit what you're going to work on. So,

because I was working within the Arabic speaking world, Yemen was a very natural place to go, but then to learn, basically as I'm finishing my exams, oh, I need to learn Dutch, that was like, ‘oh, no.’ I thought that I would pick up either Persian or Turkish as a second language, but I realized very late that I need to sit in those VOC archives. So that is another interesting side of this question, which is, again, a question of great debate among Indian Ocean people about those who rely a great deal on European sources and what that looks like in terms of the writing of those histories. But that was a very interesting turn for me. I got to connect with you a little bit on this. The fact is that I spent as much time in The Hague, as I have in Yemen, actually, for my research over the years and that was all kind of accidental. Every day I would be sitting in the Hague, and of course, it'd be raining, it was so cold, and I would think 'this is not what I bargained for. This is not what I bargained for." Of course, after it became really difficult to travel to Yemen, I realized that I was fortunate in that that field work career that I had aspired to, that I thought was going to be my whole career, I realized that that career probably is over. I don't have a crystal ball, I can't see into the future, but I know that it's going to stop for a while, and I don't see it picking up anytime soon. But I was really grateful to have those records. It's like I find myself dabbling back and forth into the VOC and kind of intersecting with what I think has become extremely vibrant in terms of thinking about this much broader expanded Dutch art history with some very, really interesting recent publications, especially Claudia Swan's--which I haven't gotten to read yet, but I'm really excited to. It's interesting to think about the reconfiguration of who one is, based on the exigencies of the research. The fact [is] that the Dutch kept ridiculously detailed records [inaudible] even though it really was not...it didn't end up very well for them there, actually.

Caro Fowler
Well, that also gets me to one of my final questions, which is addressing the ways in which, due to the current political situation within Yemen, you aren't able to access it physically on the ground, but my sense from reading your work is that that inaccessibility has led you more and more into the field of digital art history and thinking about it as a site of access, and not just celebrating it as a site of access, but also critiquing that, and thinking about the limits of that access, and the ways in which structures of power, while we might think it makes everything accessible, it doesn't. I was really struck by your discussion of using VCR technology and thinking you would be able to land in your old site of Mocha and you weren't. It just reminded me so much in terms of things I've thought

about [in terms of] why some places are UNESCO [world] heritage monuments and some aren't. So, I would just kind of like to hear about how you've come to digital art history and the ways in which you think about accessibility within digital art history?

Nancy Um
Sure, it's a great question. It's funny how one looks back and maps out choices that they made. They always seem much more logical when you look back. These choices made sense, I think they were a little bit more unstructured on the ground as they were happening, but it is interesting because anyone who works in an area that has precarity, like Yemen, like Syria today, like a place like Iran, where access is not always expected and can be extremely difficult, we've always had to think about these questions as part of our research program. We couldn't just have this beautiful idea [inaudible], but we always had to think about what was possible. I think COVID has made all of our colleagues understand a little bit, which I just think it's a good thing, but that discussion of, 'oh, what would my career look like if I could not go to the Bibliotheque Nationale in the Summer?' So, I think the discussion about that probably will change now based on the experience that everyone has had. It became really clear to me...for sure, I should say, I had wanted to go back. I would be trying to go back to Yemen for a while, but you know, things happen in my life. I had two kids at the same time, slowed things down. I had to finish a book to get tenure. There are these things that--you know how it goes--we do. Our lives get in the way of our careers in very inconvenient ways. When I was finally ready to go back, things had already started to fall apart there, and I knew that research would become really difficult. And it was around that time as well--because before the war I was one of the scholars in residence at the Getty--[that] I saw all the digital projects that they were doing. And I would tell you, I was really in shock, because I had not been up to date at all with the move toward digital art history. If you had asked me what digital art history was at that point--I'm just talking about seven, eight years ago--I would have said, 'Oh, you mean, like when they scan pictures?' I really had tuned out so many of the changes that had been taking shape in the field in really amazing ways. So, it was at that moment [that] I started to realize that I needed to be thinking about technology in ways that were much more deliberate and purposeful, that if I was going to think about, working as an art historian for the next twenty or thirty years--and who knows how long this will...how long I have in front of me--but what would give me that longevity? Understanding that your work, I think...the scholars that I meet, who have long

careers, the ones whose work has changed over time, tend to be, in my view, the ones who are the most satisfied and the happiest. So, it's not to say that there's some scholars who have these amazing careers where they work on essentially one topic, but they just do this intensive, terrific work on that topic for their whole careers. But I just will say that I think that satisfaction comes when you got that dynamism. I just like to get into these practices. I had to upskill a great deal, I'm still upskilling, like my joke is that I'm literally in a workshop or some kind of training every month, at least. I don't always finish them--you know, the classic [inaudible] who starts and doesn't finish--but I've always tried to open this up because I think it's just never ending because of the fast paced way in which technology changes. You always have to be chasing something, unfortunately. I think once you get comfortable with the fact that you're always going to be ten steps behind, then you just can accept it. So, that was a turning point for me and, I will say, I'm excited about what that future looks like. I haven't figured out exactly what it's going to look like for me. For instance, a lot of people who are really sitting at the front edge of digital art history are involved in a major digital project. I am not. I'm just doing certain things. I've integrated digital methods into my research. I'm teaching a lot, which I think is really important. And, again, and in this discussion that we've been having about thinking about doctoral education and the future of the field, to me, that's really meaningful. I've been teaching students, but also colleagues, and thinking about how all of us are going to move into a future in which technology is just going to be much more central. But at the same time, I do think that we need to be having larger conversations precisely about 'I can just practice, right?' I mean, I think that we haven't had the discussion--or maybe we have and tell me if I've missed it--about what a digital asset is for an art historian? What are we supposed to do with all these things that now sit in our hard drives that are poorly labeled? We can't remember where we found it from in our...at different resolutions in terms of images and objects, and then have messy metadata. Emily Pugh just wrote this really great article making the case that cultural institutions, museums, archives have outpaced the questions art historians are asking. They're moving more technologically, in these amazingly ambitious projects, and we're not there as researchers. I thought that was a very provocative statement and I completely agree with her. So, I think these are really interesting conversations to have. I guess, the short answer to that, or rather, the short conclusion to this very long answer to your question, is that in these precarious areas, we're going to have to depend on digitized materials and digital resources. Digital materials and methods are opening up all of these new arenas for us, but we do need to step

back and have some serious discussions about method, about even just practice and process. And if I could just add one more thing, there's this great article that I recommend to everyone it's by this Canadian historian, his name's Ian Milligan and he's made this case that all historians are digital historians now. No one sits in archives for nine months anymore and pours over documents. I think the same thing has happened with us as well right that you go in for five days you take 10,000 images, which, of course, none of us do a good job at labeling or cataloguing. We're snapping like crazy and then we go home and then we start working through these documents. What's really important, Milligan's argument is he's not trying to say, 'Oh, this is a lament, look at what we've lost.' He's just saying, 'we have to come to terms with what this change of practice means' and then ask ourselves how this is going to affect the interpretation of work of art history because it will without question. We know that practice and process is always going to have some impact on where we end up. So, I've been really taken by that. It's a very simple argument in some ways, but it's one that, again, I don't think that we have reckoned with at all in the field.

Caro Fowler
It's very true.

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.