

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

“WHAT SORT OF PROBLEMS DOES AN ARTWORK
POSE?”:
JOAN KEE ON ART HISTORY AS AN INFINITE GAME

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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.

In this episode, I speak with Joan Kee, Professor of Art History at the University of Michigan, who was also a fellow at the Clark in the Fall of 2020. She describes the influence of growing up in Seoul, Korea and also shares her uneasiness with centering a sense of self within art historical writing. Joan reflects on modes of description and their political resonances and muses about how art history must know its own strengths and limitations, particularly when it comes to fraught categories like “global contemporary,” or an assumption of a unified “we” within the discipline.

Joan Kee

So, I think the task is, how do we approach art history in such a way that art becomes more of an infinite game? In other words, where there is no clear outcome, where new players can come in anytime they want, there are no set-in-stone rules, and the end goal is just to ensure that the game keeps on being played. Perpetuation, rather than, "Oh, who's the winner and who's the loser?," becomes the end objective. And the other thing that the infinite game mindset also has me think about is it's more about the participants and less about an audience.

Caro Fowler

Thank you for joining me today. It's great to have you here. So, one thing that I was interested in starting off talking about is you came to the Clark to work on this project called “Afro Asian body,” or looking at the ways in which artists of African and Asian descent intersected in interesting ways in the mid 20th century and then also moving into contemporary. But I've also heard you talk a little bit about how this project intersects with your own history or your own embodied experience as a child, and, so, I was wondering if you could expand on that a little more? Or, it seems in some ways, this project is perhaps more personal--I think all of your work is actually personal--but is really diving into a personal aspect of your childhood that maybe hasn't come out before, if I'm not mistaken.

Joan Kee

I don't think I could have done this project even ten or five years ago. I think that now we have a matrix of circumstances that allow for these sorts of pairings or these sorts of explorations to take place. This is a project that I've been thinking about since 1995. I had taken a survey course of African American art with Judith Wilson. Judith Wilson is--for the audiences that may not recognize her name--an eminent critic. She is an art historian. She was an editor at *Ms. Magazine*. She has worn many, many hats. And one interesting thing about being taught art history by someone that has had a long experience as a critic is that she really emphasized what it means to actually describe a work. And of course, description is something that has been discussed extensively, especially in literary theory, not so much in art history, which is a little weird thing, given what might be called our chronic or even terminal obsession with close reading. What is the state of close reading? What is formalism? And so forth. But one of the interesting things about description was that there were certain works that when--so for example the collages of Betye Saar that were presented in the class--that made description very difficult because what happened is that you end up becoming something of a cataloger. You just list iconographical references, its symbolism, where does it come from. It almost feels like the art historian not necessarily devolves into but starts to take on the role of almost a thrifter, that you're just there to salvage and gather information. And that for me felt very inadequate, and that was part of the point of bringing up Saar's work in class. [What] I think what Judith was trying to do is to say, "yeah, there's a point where you have to come face-to-face with how difficult an artwork is because it's just not going to lend itself to the sorts of descriptive models with which we are often taught in art history." Now, having said all of this, part of this project also brings together different strands of having grown up in Asia, but also having had not insignificant experience in Africa. So--I think this is true also with those who write fiction--every novel or every short story, you put something of yourself into the text, even if it's not consciously done. And for me, I read a lot of fiction. When I think about art history, I think also that one has to account for the sense of self that will inevitably permeate as much as we do our best to say that, "yes, we're writing something that is objective. Let's not use the "I" pronoun. Let's try to keep this about the subject and not about oneself." But it's always struck me that as art historians there's very little explanation as to why people write about the subjects that they do. And one of the most interesting things about being at the Clark is just to ask the other fellows, "so what got you

interested in this project?" Because that also opens a completely different perspective on subjects that may seem perhaps tethered to a particular chronology or region. I'm not really one to--how shall I put it--divulge biography? I find anything confessional or, you know, overly sentimental... It's just very sad for me, I just get a start getting hives. But at the same time, I feel that there needs to be some sort of accountability as to, well, "why are you writing this project of all people?" And of course, the, the glib response would be, "well, you know, if not me, then who?" Which is fine too, but at some point, I think that there also needs to be, even if it's to oneself, to just think about okay, so what is it about this project that I feel especially compelled to do? I grew up in mostly in Seoul. I was born in the United States, but I grew up in Seoul. And we lived within striking distance of the main US military base. And when I was in middle school--and this is also when the US culture held something of a premium--we didn't have internet in those days, now I'm dating myself...radio was kind of the primary medium, and given the proximity to the US military bases, [when] you turned on the radio, you had basically two options: you could either listen to country music or you could listen to R&B and hip hop. For me that choice was not really a choice. I apologize to everyone in the audience who are diehard country and western fans, but that was not what resonated with me. And this was also in the late 80s, early 90s, so you also had a corresponding wave of diasporic Koreans coming back to Korea and producing Korean hip hop, which [has], of course, now become a mass phenomenon. But that really started in the early 90s. So that also keyed me into this question of "how is it that soundscapes produce a different kind of geography than the ones with which we were inculcated with?" Such as, if you live in Korea, you are constantly reminded that yes, there is a 38th parallel separating North from South Korea. Every month we did a mock civil defense air raid drill. Those sorts of boundaries subsided in the face of this larger soundscape in which you had younger Koreans--and also to some extent younger Taiwanese--gravitating towards black music. Cultural appropriation was not a word that was used to describe the sorts of engagements--and we could talk about that as well--but I was just also struck by just how fluidly one body or one group would move from one set of--for lack of a better word, I hate the word influence--stimuli to another. The African part...at the risk of adding myself as a child of neoliberal aspiration, my father worked for the World Bank for years and his particular field was the banking sector, so he would spend considerable time mostly in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Uganda, not so much, of course, because of the expulsion order that applied to those of Asian descent. But having that kind of frequent interaction, going back and forth

from the United States to the African continent, it's just something that when you're very young you don't really think about how that affects your sense of self in the world or how you think about the world addressing you. But it sort of bubbled to the surface with this project.

Caro Fowler

Well, it sounds like those were the coordinates by which your world was shaped. You brought up two really interesting points. I mean, one, the question of description and art history. And one thing that I think a lot about is, the ways in which description ultimately seems to come out of a--and as you discuss--kind of observational quality, that art history hasn't grappled with the way modes of description are also entangled with scientific ideas of analysis coming out of the 18th century and this idea that we can be the non-personal observer. And as much as art history is a humanities subject, I think these modes of description still infiltrate in a way. The ways in which description is entangled with ideas of 18th century science and observation has not necessarily fully been grappled with. But then you also bring up this interesting point about this turn towards autobiography and art history. And there's been a more critical turn towards this use, primarily it seems, coming out of the ways in which biography is incorporated--and in two scholars working in the African diaspora scholars like Saidiya Hartman or Christina Sharpe--and it seems like that kind of work has impacted the ways in which certain art historians are thinking about what it means to position oneself and also in some ways, perhaps, the importance of positioning oneself in relationship to one's research in order to be more transparent or make clear one's investments or one's own historical process and position [themselves] within the horizon of historical thinking. What are the questions that you're dealing with and thinking about this [with] and the ways in which instilling oneself or allowing that kind of positionality might also allow for other forms of description or other forms of embodiment and engagement with objects and works of art that perhaps previous models haven't?

Joan Kee

I'm not sure if my project is especially groundbreaking or, you know, earth shattering in any way. I mean, this is also something that I think threaded through my previous project in art and law to think about, what is the place of virtue? So, virtues like integrity or humility, for example, that you deliberately diminish yourself in order to make a space for other voices--and by voices, I don't just mean human voices, especially voices as construed through human

conceptions of agency, but also that of the work. What sort of language does the work seem to compel in exchange for you being able to encounter it at a certain place? I'm very interested in transhumanist or post humanist scholarship where the governing entity isn't necessarily human. And I know that anthropocentrism has gained a lot of currency in recent years, but I feel that perhaps the promise of that refusal of anthropocentrism really inheres in, what is what is it that the artwork is calling for in terms of the language that we use or how we should position ourselves in relation to say a physical object in a gallery?

Caro Fowler

So maybe it makes sense here to kind of back up a little bit and discuss your engagement with art and law and also the ways in which you got into art history because it wasn't your first career path. And, so, how did you get into art history? I know that you originally pursued a JD at Harvard and then pursued a PhD at the IFA. So, what was the transition between those two careers for you? How did that unfold?

Joan Kee

Well, in response to the first question, "how did you end up in art history?" I mean, that's the question I ask myself daily is "how in hell did I end up here?" And I think about, what is it that one can do in the world to better someone else's condition? I'm thinking, "Gosh, have I done anything? Probably not." I mean I've done volunteer legal work, but that's just a mere drop in the bucket. It has nothing to do with my, say, academic work. In terms of gravitating towards art, my mother trained as a painter. And that's actually much of the first book that I did on contemporary Korean art. It was a great debt to her because it was her circle of hiking friends that provided an entrée to many of the older Korean painters with whom I have worked throughout the years. Never underestimate the power of hiking women in Korea. They really could [inaudible]. It's a secret mafia that runs, not just Korea, but also large other parts of Asia as well, anywhere that has a big mountaineering culture. And if you're habituated to looking at things very early on that is something that just kind of grows. I was fortunate though to attend college at a time where it was sort of [the] golden age of art historians where you had an especially gifted set of lecturers. So of course, there was Vincent Scully, there was also Jerome Pollitt. The professors I remember the most are Judith Wilson and Jonathan Weinberg. And Jonathan Weinberg taught a number of seminars on queer arts. And that also just fundamentally changed the way I thought about not only what sorts of persons

were allowed to be considered within the remit of art history, but also about the instability of interpretation, that any kind of reading can be completely turned on its head. I mean, I guess this is also--I know I'm going off on a little bit of a tangent--but it also did strike me though that even as Yale had a particular wealth of resources at that time--I don't think it's any coincidence that there are an unusually large number of art historians that were either my year or the year above or the year behind. So from [inaudible], Alpesh Patel, Megan Luke, Jeremy Melius. I mean, this is within a five-year time span. I don't know of any other school that has produced so many professional artists historians.

Caro Fowler

So those were your undergraduate classmates?

Joan Kee

Yeah, so that's plus or minus three or four years. But still, yeah, there's a reason for that. But it did also strike me that art history is kind of like a finite game. There's a scholar of religion, James Carse, that used to teach at NYU and a long time ago he wrote a book that pitted infinite versus finite games. Finite games are things with fixed rules, known players, distinct winners and losers, sometimes it's called teleology. And it still struck me how much art history resembled the finite game. Certain figures are regarded as metonyms for an entire way of thinking. I mean, the classic example would be Clement Greenberg and formalism. I mean, even now, even in 2021, there are still people in this universe who think that formalism means Greenbergian ways of thinking about media which just blows my mind. Or another example would be the shape shifting notion of global art, or, you know, the constant interest in the idea of a shared aesthetic language where everyone reads the same magazines, refers to the same artists, goes to the same schools. And you can think of other examples too: zombie formalism, which is a term that was coined in 2014 because everything looks alike. And it also struck me that these finite games were about power as well. This is something that really hit me when I did go to law school. I went to Harvard at a time when there was no public interest program. The Dean of the school at that time had eliminated it, which basically sentenced anyone who could not afford to pay six figures to mountains of crushing debt, which in turn meant indentured servitude. So, one of the sorts of predicaments I'm always kind of thinking about is, how do we make art history less of a finite game where it's not about who consolidates the authority, or who is able to amass the most prestige? But more specifically, in terms of "why art history?" Well, one, I

was a terrible artist. I thought that, oh, you know, it would be great to double major in art because Yale had an excellent undergraduate art program. There was a professor, I'm not going to name him, he was in photography, and he said I had absolutely no talent and I probably would be better off just writing about these things. When you're nineteen and you hear these words, it's really just sort of an incredible effect. And this is also something that I've tried to be mindful of as a teacher is to be really careful about what it is that you say to students because even these stray remarks could be life changing in some ways, but it also can wound in ways that when you're older, you don't anticipate to have that effect on someone who's younger.

Caro Fowler

It's true. So, thinking about art history as this finite game and the consolidation of power, how do you in your own work as an art historian, undermine or counter or challenge this structure, of really, I think, most humanities disciplines? Do you think there's something particular to the ways in which art history consolidates it around galleries? Or the art market? Or economics? Or do you think it's true throughout all humanities disciplines?

Joan Kee

Oh, I think it does apply to a lot of the humanities, I mean, I'm thinking, sort of a good example would be, you know, colonization or capitalism! That also is a finite game mindset. The idea that you can have art salons, which is what most colonial powers did, ranging from the Japanese Empire which would host these annual art salons in Korea and Taiwan in the early 20th century where artworks would win prizes. I mean, it's just ludicrous to conceive of someone winning art, but that's what these salons basically endorse, that one work could be qualitatively better than something else. And by that logic, well, if you don't win prizes, does that mean you're a loser? So, you know, that kind of mindset is something that--for all the discussion and the push back against decolonization--is certainly still very much embedded. I think the task is, well, how do we approach art history in such a way that art becomes more of an infinite game? In other words, where there is no clear outcome, where new players can come in anytime they want, there are no set-in-stone rules and the end goal is to just ensure that the game keeps on being played, that perpetuation rather than, "Oh, who's the winner, and who's the loser?" becomes the end objective. And the other thing that the infinite game mindset also has me think about is it's more about the participants and less about an audience. When you're in the kind of

zero-sum mindset--there's a lot of, again, much needed discussion against neoliberalism--but I think what's really being talked about is this idea of neoliberalism that demands that somebody is better or superior than something else. It's all about self-optimization that you always have to strive to make yourself better which is one of the most exhausting things I've ever heard. It's like thinking, "gosh, Oh Kawara had it right when he said, "I got up." And not to say that we should try to reconfigure art history so that even the slightest of achievements is somehow celebrated, but rather about how do we think about the participants of this larger history? How is it that artworks are able to open up certain kinds of pathways and that they're not so explicitly tied to a particular outcome, or that they look as if they're following some kind of script. In my current project, when I think about Afro Asia, it does pay a bit of an homage to the concept as it first developed after World War II. Afro-Asia is now often invoked as a synonym for solidarity. But solidarity sometimes feels like it's a script that when you talk about an artwork in that context, it is an illustration of that sort of predetermined meaning. And that's what I'm trying to push back against, which is, I think something that probably will not find favor in many quarters, because unity, solidarity, community building, these are all regarded as priorities. But I'm sorry, you know, artworks don't care about solidarity, you know, maybe their creators do, but the artwork itself, it's gonna do its own thing. How is it that as an art historian, we can allow it to do its own thing, so that it can take us on a different path than what we may have may expected? I think, for this reason too, one of the other sorts of ideas that has started to take up more space in this project is the idea of the global majority. This is an idea that really started to gain momentum in the 1960s. You had liberation theologians like Colin Young in the late 60s talking about, how is it that we can think about a global majority? So, one, yes, you have to consider race. But you also think about the people that are from economically disenfranchised countries, everyone who's not part of the G7, for example, you know, people from Eastern Europe. Or one can think about a global majority in terms of, whose everyday lives are in greatest proximity to the imminence of death? That, for my own example, would be you know, Seoul is fifty miles from the world's most heavily militarized border where North Korea, if it wanted to, could destroy Seoul in two seconds. I mean, there's a Korean- and Chinese-American, pair of [inaudible] heavy Industries that made a fantastic work that that went line by line about what Seoul would look like if North Korea decided to launch a nuclear attack and I always show it in my class about global politics and contemporary art. Because there's something about the abstraction of "Oh, a nuclear war, climate change" as something that

we think about is in the long term versus the palpability of having the effects of that extinction or destruction just unraveled bit-by-bit, detail-by-detail. I think this is why description has political resonance, even if whoever is writing about the description may not have had any sort of explicit political intent to begin with.

Caro Fowler

Well, it also brings up the question that you've alluded to before, too, this question of this global contemporary and teaching the global contemporary and writing in the global contemporary and the ways in which this has become such a dominant field in art history, and yet it remains very much tied to neoliberal politics and economics. But then also, how do you position yourself vis-a-vis the global contemporary and how do you think about teaching it to your students and essentially working within a field that is, for better or worse, known as global contemporary?

Joan Kee

I hate the global contemporary. I hate everything about it. It is the exact opposite of what an infinite game is supposed to look like. Within art history we're so primed to structure--what it is that we study--that we often mistake finite games. Global contemporary is another one because, as you point out, it's become its own subfield. And rather than think of the global contemporary via the necessity of its own obsolescence, we think of it as an endpoint to which the artwork must live up to in order for it to be validated. I mean, it's just pathological. The other big, strong objection to the global contemporary, too, and this is something that I've found in reading the work of African anthropologists, like Archie Mefeje is that it is a fundamentally bourgeois exercise because who is writing about this global contemporary? They're, again, Euro-American, mostly white, usually men, [inaudible] to explain the world for the rest of us ignorant global majority people. And just thinking, the hubris of that! And this is one of the other reasons why I think autobiographical reflection does have a place is because, you know, to say, "Yeah, I'm coming from a very relativized position." I'm not going to make that relativized position a spectacle because [inaudible] can't when it's pushed too far and confession--people saying, what is it?, "I know, I've been racist in my thinking, etc, etc." Then it becomes all about them, rather than making a space for other people. And I feel like now one can even come up with another definition of the global majority which is characterized by the refusal of everything that is distilled into finite games.

History now can't afford to be in a finite game, that mindset, because you can't have these reinforced walls between regions and periods because what happens is you have less creativity as a result. That is the one thing I've always struggled with in some ways. I still consider myself a little bit of an outsider to art history, because, you know, first professional habits die very hard and I'm thinking, "why is it so necessary that Asian artists are completely sort of divided from, say, African art, even though there is an abundance of evidence that indicates lots of interaction between those two parts of the world?" Besides just thinking "Is there some sort of art history God or art history sort of Earth authority that I haven't come across?" It said, "Thou shall not cross paths?" This is something that I've been thinking about in terms of...this is not to say that there can't be finite situations within an infinite game framework. One is that not all works are equally compelling to all people in the same way. And, you know, maybe--I know, I'm setting myself up for cancellation--maybe there is a place for discussions of quality, even if they're not adjudicated by the standards that are designed to exclude the global majority. So, in other words, we can talk about works that are stronger or not as strong, but not necessarily according to the standards that have been used to keep those works from view altogether.

Caro Fowler

Right. Have you thought about how one would go about that? Or is that just kind of something you're thinking out loud about?

Joan Kee

There's a quote in that James Carse book that for me has always been quite useful. He talks about, something like, 'to be prepared against surprise is to be trained, but to be prepared for surprise is to be educated.' And so that distinction is what I'm looking for when I think about a work. You know there are works that you kind of know what the setup is. You know that they're very strategic, very well thought out. But that element of surprise is somehow missing. This is also something I always look for in books is to think about, why did the author choose to write about these particular works? And you know, I think many writers do this, but I wish more writers would, I always ask my students, "so why is this work?" You know, "how does it speak to you?" Not that I'm into this sort of vitalist philosophy. I mean, I kind of am. I'm an only child, I would talk to my stuffed animals and we'd have whole philosophical debates between the stuffed animals. But [that's] one of the reasons why I choose particular works for this project because, in theory, it could involve so many

examples. This is one of the criticisms I received from a friend of mine who said, "Well, you could have chosen well, this, this and this, you know, they're very well known. Why don't you choose them?" "Well," I said, "for me these works offer something weird or strange? Or sometimes they piss me off." One example would be David Hammons' *Afro Asian Eclipse*. It's a hanging scroll, but it's made with hair that he collected from Heartland barber shops. And you get up close, it is weird. And yet nobody seems to dwell on its weirdness. I'm thinking, "Is it just me? Am I the crazy one here who thinks this is just amazingly cool and, in some ways, completely resistant to any sort of casual explanation?" Those are the sorts of works that I'm interested in. Or Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon, the collaboration *Black & White*, which, on the surface, it seems very straightforward. Okay, half of it's black paint and half of it's so-called flesh tone paint. But then you actually look at the work in person and the blacks, they're all slightly different. And all of the flesh tones look very sad and abject by comparison, especially in gallery lighting. And you're thinking, "there's something just really kind of subversive going on." I don't like to use the word subversive too much just because it's like "precarity." It's like one of those words that everybody likes to use. My friends and I used to play fellowship bingo, where it's commonly used words on fellowship applications. And I know why those words are used, but sometimes I have a visceral reaction when a certain word becomes overplayed. But subversive is the only word to describe *Black & White* just thinking, "wow." It's a work that touches upon not just abstraction as in art history, but abstraction as the legal system uses it to justify why certain zones [or] certain neighborhoods are excluded. Or why is it that whole populations are reduced to a certain a category, for example? And that's the work that just completely brings all of those issues to the fore, but in a very kind of deceptively simple way. Those are the sorts of works that fulfill this requirement of surprise.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And one of the things that also sounds like-- going back a little bit--that you think about in terms of your relationship to practicing law versus moving into our history and thinking about how to make art history an infinite instead of a finite game--and this is something you directly said--but how do we find meaning as art historians if we're sitting in offices and writing about works of art? And it sounds like had you gone to law school to different period, you know, maybe now you would have gone more into social work law or other kinds of law and maybe it would look different. So, what do

you think are the possibilities of art history for social change, especially as art history right now as a discipline and as museums are coming out with Black Lives Matter statements and trying to engage their communities and trying to become institutions of social state change, while historically they've been institutions of privilege and exclusion?

Joan Kee

I think one priority is for art historians to know their own limitations. We can't know everything. We can't be something that we're not. There is a worrying tendency. And I've seen this with some students and scholars who think of art history almost as an *ersetzt* form of social work. And what happens is that you can't just insert yourself into community. This is a lesson that I've learned firsthand as a legal volunteer. When you have a certain degree of education, you think that "oh, I can help change this particular community." And then what happens is that you don't hear what that community is saying or what it is that they actually need or want. That's not your place. And so in some ways, I feel like when you defend your dissertation, you should also be required to take an oath--like cow doctors have to take an oath--"Thou shalt not harm or do no harm." Because, yes, awareness is important, but I think the awareness that's necessary is what values do you want to espouse through your work? We know what we know, we know the how, sometimes we start thinking about the why. But what values do you stand for? And not because someone tells you that you should stand for you know, X, Y, or Z, or because you're afraid of censure. This is also another kind of challenge: how do we think about art? What sort of choices do we make because we stand for certain values rather than because we're afraid that somebody is going to call us out on Instagram or cancel us or say that we're aiding and abetting any number of ills? What do you stand for as someone who takes up public space? I think that is the baseline question that is answered. As for what it is that art history is to do? Well, maybe we should start with what they shouldn't be doing which is taking up the space of others whose voices need to be heard more frequently and more often. I think that's certainly one. Or thinking about "okay, so what is it that art historians have a comparative advantage in?" See now I'm betraying my secondary background in economics by using these phrases. I totally hate myself. Self-abjection, by the way, is something that might be the topic of a future book...knowing what it is that you can do in your own field, so as you're thinking about what sort of problems [an] artwork poses, why is it that an artist has spent so much time and effort producing or thinking about this work? I think that's something of genuine value.

Sure, it's not curing cancer. It may not be a direct form of protest. But that also has value and I think it's okay to say that paying that kind of attention--which is, in fact, the most scarce resource, your time and attention--[is] in itself valuable.

Caro Fowler

So, by what ways do you think about imparting that to your students? And by what ways do you think about what it means to take on art history PhDs right now? While we want to create kind of an infinite possibility for art history, ultimately, the reality remains that there are only so few positions and that so many PhDs go on to--to use one of your least favorite words--precarious positions within art history, or [the] humanities, or [the] adjunct and museum world. So, how else would we navigate that, do you think?

Joan Kee

Well, I swore I wouldn't get too personal, but I might as well say this. What I tell my students is, "look, you have to think about your life. It might include the academy, but it has to also include what is it that you want from your life and then work from there." So yes, there are going to be certain structural limitations. So, say, for example, that someone says, "I want to live in San Francisco. I want to have a family and I want to live with my husband and live in a nice house." Okay. So that is going to already eliminate some options. Now, one, is you're going to be starting to look at, say, adjunct team, or you're going to start to look at temporary museum positions. They probably won't pay the kinds of salaries that would be able to support a life in San Francisco. "Okay, what else is possible?" Then you start to expand the field of opportunities from there. I think it's very dangerous to begin from a premise of scarcity, that your entire career has to be focused on getting that tenure track job. As someone who is from another industry, [I] just think that's madness. There are many other options, many things that you can do with your life. But I think the main goal I tell my students is "what do you want from life?" And again, it's not just career wise, but just in general, what do you want your life to look like? And I think starting from there is helpful in thinking about, "Okay, well, I certainly don't want to do this or that. But, you know, this perhaps would then direct me to liv[ing] in San Francisco or wanting to have lots of autonomy in you know, one's position or working with a particular demographic." I think being able to identify what is most important to you is something that will direct you in a different trajectory. I have students--PhD students--who left the academy altogether, not even museum jobs and by all accounts [they are] doing very well. I think also, in terms

of teaching undergraduate students, one of the priorities I have is to have them think with me about how there's there seems to be a desire within art history to wish the discipline into becoming its own moral tradition, so one where conscience and ethical judgment play more defining roles than they have in the past. And that's certainly mirrored in artworks that are produced in the last 20 to 30 years. I think that's still an unresolved question. Another question that I have undergrads and grads think with me together is, maybe art history has been stretched past its ability to withstand the expectations we have of it. The "we" or the "our" in question, when we say, "we think of art history in this way," or "our shared art history.," the "we" and the "our" are very, very different. And so that's also what I'm trying to address in bringing up this idea of the global majority in my current project. Who is this "we"? Because the "we" that we've been reading about for a long time has not included a lot of people. So, thinking, "well, your "we" may not be my "we," so please tell me what you mean by "we.""

Caro Fowler

You're also working on what art historians would call a trade book. I'm just a little curious to hear about your emoji project, if I may, and kind of where that came from? At the lecture you gave at the Clark, you definitely referenced the emergence of skin tone emojis at the end in relationship to Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim's project.

Joan Kee

Well, first, I am deeply flattered that you would call this a trade book. That is a high aspiration. I would love to publish outside of academia. I might not have the wherewithal to do so because I think that also requires a certain kind of style of writing and way of thinking that maybe I'm just not up to par for. So, thank you for that compliment. Yes, that would be the goal. I mean, as it stands now, it's a short book. It's something like twenty-three chapters. All chapters are like two-to three-thousand words, each about one single emoji. The reason why I embarked on this book is because of just this primordial rage because when I first saw the emojis I was thinking this is the dumbest thing I've ever seen. Even now when I see an emoticon it makes my intestines shrivel. What is even more [inaudible] than having punctuation marks assembled together to make little smiley faces? [It's] those pictograms. And rage, by the way, is an amazing motivator. It really can do all kinds of things. Who actually designs these emojis? And there has been quite a bit of work done. I'm thinking about a journalist and

writer named Jennifer 8. Lee that actually tracked how these emojis were designed because she tried to get the dumpling emoji approved and then she found out it's just a bunch of old guys sitting around in Mountain View, California thinking, "oh, you know, this is too region-specific, or this is not going to be applicable to most users." It's not unlike, say, a US consul office giving out visas. This is where any kind of prejudice or any kind of racist, sexist, ableist, what-have-you, runs rampant. They either approve or disapprove based on whatever it is that this particular group of people deems worthy as something that could be applicable to phone users. Now, in terms of the skin tone emojis--and so this is something that has been talked about quite extensively--that Simpsons kind of jaundice yellow alone isn't enough to cover the range of human users. Again, this is also where the global majority comes in. But there's also been lots of backlash in terms of people who have been using darker skinned emojis to pass as something that they're not in, pulling a Jessica Krug, for example. You can present yourself in cyberspace as a particular individual and no one will actually know who you are because you just use dark-skinned emojis. It's like another technique of blackface that has been abused. But my main focus is on, why are there certain emojis like the cactus? There's a corporation that tried to use the cactus emoji as its name and a court said, "you can't use a picture as a name." And the company was like, "Well why not?" And they said, "well, for the same reason we don't let parents to name their children with numerals"--although I'm told that Elon Musk has done his best to have that law rescinded or overturned. But, in some ways, emojis represent the worst of capitalist society, this endless sort of supply of all of these ridiculous little pictures having these little faces that we use to basically outsource our having to invest any sort of emotional labor when we respond to somebody's text. So now we put a little heart or a smiley face and that's it, we're done for the day. So, do emojis diminish one's quality of affective life? And this is one of the reasons why I teach emojis to students, because they're much better versed at this than I am. I'm just a Luddite who barely knows what tik tok is and they're saying, "no, but emojis allow [one to] accelerate the frequency of encounters, so that one can still feel or retain a sense of proximity to people you care about, even if you don't exchange any words, or any sort of substantive message." I'm always really leery about all those 9 million articles that say how art history can, or the humanities can, make itself useful in a world dominated by STEM disciplines. I'm thinking, one, you know, that defensiveness is never very attractive. And two, we should really be doubling down on what we do particularly well. But regarding emojis--in terms of the design process too--how certain emojis look and going back to the skin

color question, what is it that's omitted or what is it that's included also reflects some of the pre-inscribed biases that we're just constantly bombarded with because it's on your phone, it's on your keyboard, it's nothing you can do about the design, and you still have to press that button if you want to convey a certain message. I know very little about art and technology, but I feel like this is also another kind of untapped--or not untapped because there's quite a bit of scholarship on it--but this is also where I think art historians can intervene and have something meaningful to say.

Caro Fowler

Is there anything you want to say before we close or any final thoughts?

Joan Kee

One thing that just kind of struck me too is when you talked about what it is that art historians do, it made me think about some of the recent calls for decolonization. In some ways, it also sounds as a call for scholars to function beyond expectation, so that you do something beyond the imperatives of duty or debt. And if so, does that require sacrifice? And if so, what does that sacrifice look like? Whether it be...I can't think of any concrete examples, but should sacrifice be part of this conversation about what it is that art historians can do in the face of all of these sorts of pressures to change all kinds of systems that have been damaging for so long? I always felt that graduate programs should institute a mandatory summer internship in a field outside of art history that serves workers activist community or another organization that has that is understaffed. One because—and this is true throughout many fields of academia--most people in academia have never held a job outside of academia. So, when they talk about the world, you think about how mediated it is by--I hate to say it—institutionalization, that the university becomes the world or disciplinary organizations become the world. There are people dying and being harassed and arrested every day. And that can't be your definition of the world that you pass on to somebody else. I don't know if I if I had any part, which I don't. I'm perfectly happy to own up to that, yeah, that I think either graduate students could...And I think there's also a real desire among students, at least the ones I've had the privilege of encountering that they also want to be in this larger world and be able to think about art history outside of its own disciplinary formations.

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for speaking with me today, Joan. It was a lot of fun.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and 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.