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

"An Archive of Exchange": C. Ondine Chavoya on Chicanx and Latinx 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 of In the Foreground, I speak with C. Ondine Chavoya, Professor of Art History and Latino/Latina Studies at Williams College. We discuss what shaped his interest in Chicanx art, his role in establishing Latino/Latina Studies at Williams, and the immersive experience of building and curating from an archive. Ondine also describes the ways in which he hopes to move the field of art history forward.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I think there's a way in which Chicanx and Latinx art history is still fundamentally – or portions of it – are fundamentally illegible to the discipline.

Caro Fowler:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Ondine. I really appreciate it.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I'm happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Caro Fowler:

Did you study art history at UCSC or how did you first get interested in art history?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Well, my interest in art history actually comes from prior to going to college. Growing up in Southern California, as a high school student, I worked in a Brentano's bookstore. And so my earliest art education was all gleaned from the magazines in the bookstore. So I got this early art education, if you will, from Interview Magazine, from Details, from i-D, from The Face, from Arena. So all of my earliest interest in art was all fed through these magazines that I also got to spend a tremendous amount of time with while I was working in the bookstore.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. That's wonderful. And so when you went to UC Santa Cruz, did you know you wanted to study art history or visual culture when you went there? Or did you find a teacher who was really important for you?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Well, I think there are very few working class, Latinx kids that go to college and say "I'm going to study art history." [Both laugh] I mean, really, my ambitions at the time were either to work in the foreign service or to become an MTV VJ.

Caro Fowler:

Okay, fair enough. [Laughs] Who didn't want to be an MTV VJ?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But you know, Santa Cruz was such an ideal space for me in so many ways. And it's interesting because at the time it really was still being modeled as the liberal arts college, or the liberal arts college model, within the University of California system. And so I had this really perhaps quite radical – though I didn't realize it was radical at the time – interdisciplinary training. The first class that I took that really introduced me to a myriad of things that would become, that I've become quite passionate about, was a class called "Monks, Maidens, and Vampires: The Gothic Imagination in Film and Literature," and that was taught by Thyrza Goodeve. That really was both an introduction to particular kind of theoretical questions as well as historical questions. And then I started taking more and more art history. And the professor that was really influential at the time was Lisa Bloom. It was interesting. So many of these professors were either recent graduates of the PhD program in History of Consciousness at UC Santa Cruz, or were currently students in that program. Kobena Mercer was also a professor there and I sat in on his lectures in Pop art at the time, although, I mean, I should have taken the class, and I'm really not sure why I didn't. So my time at Santa Cruz, at least in the academic realm, was spent focused on feminist art history, queer film and media theory and Chicana and Chicano literary and cultural studies. So it was a very interdisciplinary program for me. I didn't realize it at the time, but one of the experiences that was going to end up having a really consequential impact was an internship that I had at the San Jose Museum of Art as a junior in college. I think I'd go once a [week], spend the whole day working in the museum, and then visit my grandparents who lived in San Jose afterwards, before I came back to campus late in the evening. And the curator there who I was working with, Diane Hoover, invited me to do an interview with an artist for an upcoming exhibition. And that artist happened to be Gronk –

Caro Fowler:

Wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

– one of the founding members of the Asco group.

Caro Fowler:

Of course.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And this conversation that we had, this interview, ostensibly, that we had, was introduction to Chicano avant-garde art, to Chicano art in general, let's just say. And little did I know that some years later I would be organizing their retrospective. [Laughs] That was the introduction.

Caro Fowler:

So was it obvious to you after you finished your BA that you wanted to pursue a PhD in art history? Did you go straight to graduate school or did you take some time working afterwards?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

So I did both.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs].

C. Ondine Chavoya:

So yes, I did go directly from my undergraduate studies to a graduate program. And that graduate program was housed in an art history department, but I think it's important, this distinction – I hope I'm not cutting hairs here – but I didn't apply to art history programs for graduate study. At least not traditional ones.

Caro Fowler:

Okay. Right.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I applied to what was then called the Comparative Arts Program at the University of Rochester, which was an interdisciplinary PhD program in art history that brought together art history, film studies, and comparative literature. It was the only graduate program I was interested in at the time. And the only one I applied to.

Caro Fowler:

Wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

It soon became the Visual and Cultural Studies PhD program, which it still is to today.

Caro Fowler:

Right. Of course.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But I think, for me at least, I did not have interest in applying to other more traditional art history programs. And had I not have gotten into Rochester, I would have worked in a museum for a period of time before applying to programs. And I had that opportunity. I had a decision: to stay working at the Museum of Modern Art or to go to graduate school, and I chose graduate school.

Caro Fowler:

Right. Did you find it a cultural shift to move to the East Coast after growing up in California?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Oh, for sure. And even moving from Manhattan and Brooklyn to Rochester, New York – that was a radical cultural shift as well.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I'd never seen snow before I went to Rochester. So, yes. And that radical shift actually ended up having a big impact on me, in helping to set this trajectory and establish or help me establish my focus or determine my focus to study Chicanx and Latinx art. When I went to Rochester, my dissertation topic was kind of broadly, I was thinking about it in terms of what I was describing at the time, what did I call it?: "post-colonial performance and gender dystopia in British New Wave." I was going to be looking at the visual and performative expressions of musical groups like Adam and the Ants and Bow Wow Wow.

Caro Fowler:

Oh, wonderful.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

It was while I was there, and because of that kind of radical displacement from Southern California, from UC Santa Cruz, from also not having to explain what Chicano or Chicana was, [that] I set a new course for myself. And with some resistance from the faculty at the University of Rochester.

Caro Fowler:

Oh, really? So what was, were they concerned that you wouldn't be able to get a job with the dissertation topic you wanted? Or what was the concern?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

It was even before the time when one would be thinking about kind of job prospects and possibilities.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I think it was a combination of things. I think the concern – and it is perhaps something that graduate students still to this day battle – is that when there aren't faculty who have expertise in those areas, right, who is going to advise you on those topics? But I was also told by some of the faculty and directors of the program at the time that I didn't come there to do Chicano studies, I'd come there to do the program. And I was like, I'm not doing Chicano studies. I'm actually trying to do an art history that develops a new epistemology, a new object to study, on Chicanx and Latinx art history. This was initiated and inspired by a totally circuitous, or random, if you will, set of possibilities that were put in place by

visiting faculty. So Laura Pérez, for example, was a postdoctoral fellow in the Susan B. Anthony Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Rochester, teaching a course on Chicana literature, and then of course on Chicana aesthetics, in my first year of graduate school. So this was the first time that I was ever able to take a class specifically in this area.

Caro Fowler:

Oh wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And at a time when very few of these courses were offered anywhere in the country.

Caro Fowler:

I'm sure. Yeah, of course.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And then the next year, which would have been my second year in graduate school, Chon Noriega was a visiting faculty member at Cornell.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Rochester had a scholar exchange program with Syracuse and Cornell that I applied to participate in, to take courses with Chon. And I did this and I was able to take a class on Chicano film and video, and then a course on Chicano aesthetics with Chon. And I was commuting by Greyhound in order to do that, which was something like a six-plus-hour commute a day for each class.

Caro Fowler:

Oh my god. [Laughs]

C. Ondine Chavoya:

[Laughs] I got a lot of reading done that semester on the Greyhound. But Chon was also organizing an exhibition, which is one of the reasons why he was visiting, why he was faculty that year. The exhibition was called "Revelaciones: Hispanic Art of Evanescence." I, along with Jennifer González, were graduate students in residence for part of that exhibition as well. The show included artists like Amalia Mesa-Bains, Gronk, Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, María Brito, and Daniel J. Martinez, among many others. So these first two years of my graduate study, of having access to these pioneering faculty members, professors charting new areas and territories for study outside of art history. These are people, you know, incredible people, coming to teach this material, and I just happened to be there at that particular, at that moment.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But I sought it out. I sought it out explicitly. And then after those experiences, really said I am going to change my trajectory. This is what I'm going to focus on. There's an incredible need for it. I recognized the need for it. I was given incredible access to it as well.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Because it was so clear that there were so few graduate students undertaking this interest, right? And talking to these artists. But then I was also getting push-back from faculty at the University of Rochester. There was a moment when it looked like I was going to be forced out even.

Caro Fowler:

Oh, wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Yeah.

Caro Fowler:

Where do you think that was coming from? I mean, one would think that as innovative a program as that one, there would be an openness to charting your own course? Do you think – where was the concern coming from?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I still don't fully understand that. I think there'll be opportunity for us to maybe get through some of the threads of this because I think it persists – I think there's a way in which Chicanx and Latinx art history is still fundamentally – or portions of it – are fundamentally illegible to the discipline, or to certain powerful operators in the discipline. And it's because it doesn't follow the traditional ways in which we categorize or approach the discipline and the field, through things like nation-state and influence and all the genealogies that Latinx and Chicanx art history in some ways transgress. My first teaching positions were in Film and Media Studies and they have all been because of this experience I had working with Chon Noriega. So I first taught at the University of New Mexico, and taught a course on Native American and Chicano film and video. I was then Chon's sabbatical replacement at UCLA. My first teaching position was at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, at Tufts –

Caro Fowler:

Oh yeah, wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

– where I was in their Visual and Critical Studies Program or department. I was there for three years and then RISD recruited me to be their first contemporary art historian. I was there for two years. And then Williams recruited me to help them build the Latino/Latina Studies program here at the college.

Caro Fowler:

So what were your first experiences coming to Williams? A small liberal arts college in rural western Massachusetts, and building a Latinx program there?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

When the program was introduced at Williams, it was the first and may still be the first, I'm not sure about that, free-standing Latino/Latina Studies program in a liberal arts college in the country. And what I loved about it, and in helping to collaboratively develop it, is that the visual arts and performance were at the center of it.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And that is very distinct from the general kind of trajectory of most other programs and departments, right? Where they tend to be more grounded in the social sciences, and the arts and performance are occasionally taught or brought in, or there may be one faculty member that teaches it.

Caro Fowler:

And so it seems like from your time at Williams, you've had some incredibly productive collaborations with the Williams College Museum of Art. From an outside perspective it seems curating and the curatorial role has so profoundly, it seems, shaped your scholarship and both your ability to impact and move your field forward. How do you think about the role of curating within Latinx and Chicanx studies, as a means to help transform the discipline?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I think one of the things that I learned with the experience of the "Asco: Elite of the Obscure" retrospective exhibition that I co-organized and that WCMA, the Williams College Museum of Art, really the first museum to sponsor and take on, is that the exhibition could have a much more dynamic impact on the field than other forms of research and publications. And so that compelled me, I suppose. I'm trying to find another word. But it became very clear. You know, I'd been writing about Asco for a number of years prior to co-organizing the exhibition with Rita Gonzalez. I'd been, researching in their personal archives, researching in institutions – you know, some of the artists involved with Asco in their personal archives and in some of the institutional archives – and regularly publishing academic articles in journals and anthologies about Asco. Those were having an impact. And there was a kind of growing constellation of scholars and curators looking at this work. And so we were having a dialogue and really trying to introduce Asco into the broader field, but were hitting these .... I don't want to discount that work, because it's fundamental and essential and groundbreaking, the work that a number of us were involved in, in terms of researching and publishing. But the impact of the exhibition, and the accompanying catalogue, was just – there was both a difference in scale and a shift in the temporal impact, right? It's funny, I think about this in different ways, too. I don't know if this is going to help to connect, but I had an interesting experience developing an exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art, which was not on Chicano art, which was on the French video artist Michel Auder. Michel is someone who was connected to the kind of Philippe Garrel crowd in Paris in '68. But also someone connected to the Warhol scene. [He] was married to Viva, the Warhol superstar, and then later married to Cindy Sherman. And was a video documenter or video diarist, a chronicler, if you will, whose work had also kind of gone under-documented, under-analyzed. So I went to a screening in New York, met

Michel Auder afterwards, and Taylor Mead: one of my idols, the Warhol superstar and bohemian poet. And I came back to Williams and said, you know, I met this incredible artist, I'd really like to develop an exhibition, would that be possible? And within six months, Lisa Dorin and I had put together this exhibition on Michel Auder that we presented at the museum. And I ended up writing an accompanying brochure on Michel that turned out to be the first academic treatment of his work. It was the first longer or more expansive look at his work to try and place it in a historical and interpretive framework. That essay on Michel Auder, an essay I'm proud of, but what was interesting to me is it got picked up immediately. Within six months, it was on the cover of a journal. Before the year was over, it had been translated into French. It had an almost immediate circulation, in a way that – and so I used the same methodology that I'd used for writing about Chicano artists for well over a decade. And it was taking about 10 years for that work just to begin to have ripple effects, it seemed. And then I put together an exhibition within six months on a French artist based in New York, with these other types of art world connections, and it circulated. And it just, it seemed to have a kind of wider sphere of influence in circulation, almost immediately. And there was such a kind of lag with my work on Chicano art. So that's one thing that I've also, I learned that from organizing exhibitions and developing scholarship in tandem with the exhibitions, and seeing the impact and influence that that can have on the field of contemporary art history and scholarship.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Well, I think what you're pointing to as well, and I appreciate how much you're importantly stressing the ways in which scholarship is integral to the formation of these exhibitions, but it also – do you sense kind of a necessary, that there needs to be a necessary shift within academia to reevaluate or revalue the work that is done in museums? And to recognize that there is kind of a publicness that needs to happen now in shifting people's perspectives or abilities to have dialogue and discourse, and that perhaps museums are better activated to facilitate this right now than academic institutions, which are slower to change?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I do think that museums are better activated to facilitate this. And in particular, I think college and university museums are, because that's where research-based exhibitions can really thrive.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And be supported, right, in ways that fit the mission of the institution particularly well. So I definitely think that museums are better facilitated. I think academic institutions are as well. I'm not convinced about academic publishing. I think this is a conversation that is kind of long overdue. It has to do with the problematic role of exhibition catalogues and their perception within traditional academic contexts. In particular when it comes to how they're valued or not valued, in terms of tenure and promotion.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

You know, I think there's this – you know, because often exhibition catalogue contributors, you know, contributions to exhibition catalogues are commissioned and don't undergo the same forms of blind peer review that many academic journals do, they're not accepted, right? Writing for exhibition catalogues, editing exhibition catalogues, producing exhibition catalogues is not accepted or is not valued as highly as other forms of academic publications. But exhibition catalogues do go through extensive review. But then also within exhibition catalogues, it's where at least for contemporary – and this may be the case for other fields as well – it's where so much of this scholarship is happening and being produced.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Especially in new areas and fields of study. This is definitely the case for Latin American art history. And it's certainly the case for Latinx art history. It's where the critical questions and the research is collected and shared. On the flip side of that, I think there's another way in which academic art historians don't value exhibition catalogues and exhibitions in other ways, in that there's a different ethics and politics to citation. So there's a way in which I see repeatedly how scholars and art historians and people writing about exhibitions and research that they come to in exhibitions feel that they can just lift that material without citing it. Or when you're working or writing for an exhibition, your wall labels and your wall texts are not attributed.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, I know. And that's changing now, isn't it? Slowly?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

In certain contexts. But in other museums, curators aren't even listed.

Caro Fowler:

I know, yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Right? So there's this way in which the intellectual labor is sometimes made visible and hyper-visible, and other times where it's totally obscured and erased or elided.

Caro Fowler:

No, I think that's a really good point. That's a really important point. How do you see the possibilities for art history as a discipline to productively engage with social inequality, and what do you think are its possible interventions, but also the limits as well for art history as a discipline and its ability to address social inequality within the US?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I love this question and I struggle with it so much. I think sometimes I focus so much on the limitations.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Even though I'm directly involved in educating a group of students who I hope will continue this work to eradicate the traditional gatekeeping that art history has been so fundamentally a part of. And, I think I draw my inspiration and lessons from the artists. And I do my best to showcase the work that I think is promoting those models for thinking about greater representation, inclusivity, equity, and greater access to democratic participation. And thinking about how then to re-present those materials, whether in a classroom or an essay or an exhibition in ways that help to shed light or bring out those ideas, those voices, those models, and present them to a public so that they can kind of think through them themselves.

Caro Fowler:

I do also often see and think about the limits of art history. And I would be curious to hear from you. What are the limitations that you feel frustrated by, or that you struggle with?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I suppose, you know, my approach to this has always been to work in a more interdisciplinary way. And that's where I'm grateful for this kind of incredibly rich dynamic, interdisciplinary training that I had. And maybe, as an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz, didn't recognize how radical it was and how, while in some ways still Eurocentric, how open it was, right, to different traditions, or to alternative forms of modernity, and different expressions of that. I think back to something that Coco Fusco said at that time, in the early 1990s. I remember Coco saying that, you know, when scholars of colorwere talking about work from within their own communities, or even aligned communities, that they were – and I'm paraphrasing here – that one was told repeatedly that your work was either too subjective or too authoritative.

Caro Fowler:

Wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But that ultimately you couldn't make that determination, right? I think an element of that still exists, which concerns me.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And so I think it still has impact on where students go to study Latinx art and visual culture. They're oftentimes not doing it, you know, in art history programs because those questions and those issues aren't supported in the same ways as they might be in other interdisciplinary programs.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Do you think that that's changing now? I mean, having been in this field now for what, about 30 years? How has the trajectory – I mean, also you're dealing with so many different terrains, Latin

American, Latinx, Chicano/Chicana – I mean, how have these different – what's happened over the past 30 years?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Well, there has been, I mean, a lot really has happened.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And there's been this increased acceleration, right? A really rapid acceleration. And an opening up. No doubt. There has been an opening up. And yes, there are some of those positions, but there are still fundamental misunderstandings. And I see them in the job ads, like, do they want a Latin Americanist, or do they want someone doing Latinx art history? Right?

Caro Fowler:

Right. Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And it seems like they generally want a Latin Americanist. [Laughs] Because that follows the more traditional ways that art history departments were built in terms of geography, nation-state, time period....

Caro Fowler:

Do you teach a survey of Latinx art at Williams?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

No.

Caro Fowler:

Is that, I mean, is that something you would like to do? Or is it a history that to you wouldn't be served by that kind of lecture course?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I have found that for me, and this could change, because, you know, Mari Rodriguez Binnie has been recently teaching more survey-oriented courses that incorporate Latin American and Latinx art and having success with that. When I first started teaching, I did offer a course on Latin American and Latinx art, well over 20 years ago. Because I serve both a unit in Latina/Latino Studies and art history, my classes have to serve kind of both of those students. So when I teach an advanced seminar, for example, that class.... I'll stop. But for the time being, at least, I've found that the lecture classes that work best for me are courses like Pop art.

Caro Fowler:

Right. Of course. That makes sense.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Where I'm bringing in Latinx and Latin American art into that class, consistently and regularly.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And then more focused topical courses, like sometimes really quite focused, like a course on Latinx installation and site-specific art, might bring or attract a small group of students, but we're able to get into that material, that history, that discourse, quickly and do advanced work with that material quite quickly as well.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. How has, I mean, I know that you were involved in the LA/LA initiative at the Getty. What kind of impact did that, did those series of exhibitions and projects have on the field of, I guess, both Latin American and Latinx art history in the United States?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I think we're still waiting to see.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

C. Ondine Chavoya:

You know, I think in terms of, beyond the exhibitions, and all the discourse and press that they generated, which was substantial, right, the exhibition catalogues are going to have the lasting long-term impact. I use them in all of my teaching now. In fact, I have two classes, two seminars, where we devote ourselves to the different PST initiatives: the first one focused on Los Angeles, and then the second one focused on, you know, LA/LA, Latin America and Los Angeles. I think for me where some of the questions remain is, what impact will it have on museum collections?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And that's always a question, you know, what museums decide they can exhibit versus what they decide that they can acquire.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs] Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And also in terms of staffing. This is something that I have been working on on different fronts, is trying to increase the dialogue and the exchange between Latinx art history and Latin American art history,

and in particular, trying to find ways to introduce Latinx art history into Latin American museum institutions and exhibitions. Because there've been really dynamic moments of exchange happening there over the decades, but nothing that's really been sustained.

Caro Fowler:

So I'd love to hear more about the specificity of the history of Latinx art for you, and its challenges.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

I'm going to offer you – I'm going to start with a minor anecdote. And then I want to talk about something. So, I always get into trouble when I do this, when I – but there's a question around terminology and constantly shifting terminology, right?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And the necessity for that terminology to shift and for us to place demands on the terminology to shift, to become more inclusive. And in a way that... so here's the anecdote. When I first started teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, we still used slides, right? [Both laugh] And slide libraries are organized, or were organized, in very particular ways. And so when I first started teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and was having slides made and having to build a collection that I could teach from, and these were the tools and resources for teaching for my slides, I was putting in all these requests. And then midway through my first semester, I noticed that every single slide that was being produced for me was being labeled "Chicano." And it didn't matter: so it could be, you know, an artist like, um, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, right, who's Puerto Rican from New York. It didn't matter who the artist was. It could have been Carrie Mae Weems, right? Adrian Piper. [Laughs]

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Every slide that I was requesting to be made for my teaching was being labeled "Chicano." And that's how they were going to be organized and stored and categorized, right? For future retrieval and teaching. Both for myself and for other faculty at the school who might want to use this material. And when I brought this to the attention of the slide assistant, it generated a really harsh response. And I was reprimanded by this person for not telling them, or explaining to them, how to categorize the slides in their own collection.

Caro Fowler:

Wow.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But there was this collapse between my own personal identity –.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

And one of the areas that I taught in. And everything that I was asking to be produced for my teaching. And to contribute to the collection, right? Which was not just a collection for me. It wasn't my personal slide collection. It was going to be, it was the school's collection. And the response because of this, because when I asked how this happened and if it could be changed, it was seen as somehow antagonistic.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

The response was that they were never going to categorize a slide for me again. Which meant that all of the slides from then on out would be completely disorganized. There would be no way to organize them.

Caro Fowler:

Did the slide librarian not bother, I mean, was the librarian not bothering to categorize any of the other kind of European modernist slides that were coming through, or? I mean, that's...

C. Ondine Chavoya:

No, those were getting categorized, and getting categorized to the strict demarcations –

Caro Fowler:

So it was just that, that's....

C. Ondine Chavoya:

– set by ARLIS [Art Libraries Society of North America], or whatever the organization was that was setting those designations.

Caro Fowler:

I mean, that's such a profound encounter with, frankly, institutionalized racism. How do you move beyond that and continue to work at an institution?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

That's an existential question. [Both laugh] And it, I mean, it's one of many, right? And it's the institutionalized racism of the discipline as well, right?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

The ways that it manifests itself towards individuals, faculty, students, staff alike, in various forms. And, you know, they're not isolated. And it's not to say that these things also haven't occurred to me and others here at Williams. They happen repeatedly. They've happened at the Clark. They've happened at WCMA. They've happened at Williams. In encounters with all kinds of people around this fundamental misunderstanding around questions of identity and identification. So I do try my best to focus on the openings, right. The small victories and the successes along the way. And the generosity of spirit and potentials for kind of really incredible, intimate collaboration that also happens. That has a capacity to have a dramatic change, I suppose.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Well, that brings me to kind of a couple of my final questions. I noticed that, I think was it last semester you were teaching a course at Williams called Queer Archives, Queer Art, is that correct? Last year?

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Correct.

Caro Fowler:

I'm very interested in the archive as kind of a theoretical category. But one thing I was struck, in your citation of Ann CvetkovichI was struck by your citation of her work and her thinking about the archive of feelings and the archivist of emotion, and thinking about the ways in which these more – the ways in which we, the possibilities for curating affect and the more ephemeral human interactions that happen, and how we can keep these for posterity and keep these for future generations to kind of understand histories. In art history, there's kind of "Archive" with a capital "A", and yet so many of the works that you were talking about, in "Axis Mundo" in particular, really came out of more personal encounters. So I would just be curious to hear about the course that you were teaching and your own ways in which you think about the archive and art history.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

Thank you. Yeah. One of the goals with the exhibition and also with my teaching is thinking about how to expand the archive and our understanding of it. And certainly, you know, one of the means to do that is through original research, through scholarship, through exhibitions. And then one of the other ways is to also rethink, you know, what is the "Archive" with a capital "A"? What's the archive, you know, what are the various forms that archives and archiving and preservation can take? For the development of "Axis Mundo," we really did, and we document this to some extent in the catalogue essay, had to in addition to tracing an art history, what we're also looking at is tracing cultural and social networks that generate and sustain art practices. And looking at how artists worked across shared spaces, how artists worked in collaborative groups, and how they worked through correspondence and exchange as well. And the different types of archives that were left, or not, as a result. So developing the exhibition also involved a tremendous amount of emotional labor. In particular with the house visits, you know, where we were reaching out to family members, surviving partners, band members, colleagues, friends, trying to find what was left behind, and what these individuals had been the caretakers of and for, and what they were willing to share with us. With so many of those visits to living rooms, storage facilities, garages, literally digging through, with loved ones, the materials that remained, or with the artists themselves the materials that remained, the types of the relationships and the trust that also had to be cultivated and developed through that process. And the reason why this type of sleuthing, archival work,

deep digging became necessary was the exhibition was organized from an archive and a community. The ONE Archives, the world's largest LGBTQ archive, which began as a community archive and is now a part of USC's libraries. If we had started, or if our exhibition relied exclusively on materials that were in that collection at that time, we would have very little to show. And that has to do with the history of that institutional archive and how it was built and its priorities and its resources. What is there, what we would have had an exhibition of, it would have been largely pornographic, and it would have been images of bodies of color, you know, images of Brown bodies, graphic images of Brown bodies for Euro-American consumption, largely made by Euro-American photographers. Over the course of these visits, many individuals – artists, family members – did donate collections to The ONE[Archives], that are now available for future research. This was also, I think, this connects to the archive of feeling. Because I think for some of the individuals and family members that we met with, there was in some ways a relief, if you will, of being like, they've been caretaker for these materials for, you know, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, knowing that they could go to a place where would be preserved, that came with a certain amount of – how to describe – like, emotion, right, and love. Like the memory of their family member, band member, or loved one, partner, would be institutionalized and made available to students, researchers, curators in the future, it had a lot of emotional impact and affect as well. That was kind of an unforeseen effect of developing the exhibition that I hope will continue to resonate in terms of scholarship and research, but also for the family members, and for the people that donated those collections.

Caro Fowler:

Well, I think it's also such an important point to make about the, all the different ways in which we do art history, or we do scholarship, no? I mean, it's not just publishing or writing or even curating, but it can also be the possibility of being, you know, a temporary archivist, or shaping the ways in which collections can be accessed by the future, which is actually incredibly important, although not very visible work. So.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

It's so true. It's not very visible work, right?

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs].

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But it does, there's an emotional labor that comes with it. As well as, you know, time. It's also not the most efficient way to do research either, I suppose. [Laughs].

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

C. Ondine Chavoya:

But one that I personally find incredibly fulfilling. Or the type of selections that get made at the time that we go from the kind of archive of activity, right, and the archive of exchange, and the transition that happens from "here's all the raw material that we received during this time period," and "this is how we have to package it into a narrative," or into a kind of art history, right? And all that falls out in the process. All the selections that are made in the process.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

C. Ondine Chavoya:

All the exclusions that are made in the process.

Caro Fowler:

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles, and artworks discussed, please consult clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.