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

"TO MAKE VISIBLE THE STRUCTURES":
CHALLENGING THE CANON, DIGITAL AND BEYOND
WITH NIALL ATKINSON AND MIN KYUNG LEE

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Transcript

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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.

Anne Helmreich
Hello, and welcome to this podcast series on Grand Challenges of Art History: Digital Methods and Social Art History. My name is Anne Helmreich, associate director of the Getty Foundation.

Paul Jaskot
And I am Paul Jaskot, Professor of Art History at Duke University.

Anne Helmreich
The contributors to these podcasts all responded to our invitation to address what we self-consciously described as a “grand challenge.” This was organized under the auspices of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark, which generously sponsored our scholarly colloquia and ensuing public conversation in April 2019. The phrase "grand challenge" is one frequently adopted in the sciences to refer to the great unanswered questions that represent promising frontiers. For art history, we saw the conjoining of digital and computational methods and the social history of art as one of those grand challenges.

Paul Jaskot
Given that investigating society, in all its complexity, also seemingly calls for the big data so central to computational methods, we asked the podcast participants how digital art history might help us explore the grand challenges of the social history of art's future. How are digital methods effective, or not, at analyzing large-scale structural issues important to art history, and modes of visual expression? Our intent is to discuss the concerns central to contemporary practitioners of the social history of art, as well as those of digital humanists who claim an allegiance to these same questions. In doing so, we aimed to consider practical, rigorous, archival, and theoretical ways of addressing such a task with both computational and analog means. We hope that you enjoy the series.

Niall Atkinson
What the social history of art helps us do is expose the mechanisms by which the canon--or who gets to say what the canon is--and what we do with it. There are other kinds of forces in which the canon is being formed, that are being sort of sanitized in both how we traditionally talked about the work of art and how we've also talked about who decides what a valuable work of art is...I think the social history of art can provide the critical analysis that help us to undermine those structures, and make them visible.

Anne Helmreich
I'm Anne Helmreich with the Getty Foundation. And joining me today is Min Kyung Lee from Bryn Mawr College, and Niall Atkinson from University of Chicago. Today, we're thinking about the canon, and how both the social history of art and digital computational methods, respectively and in tandem, have challenged the canon and created new narratives. To start our conversation, I think it would actually be helpful if we tackle the topic of the canon itself--what we mean by this term that cuts across many humanistic disciplines. But for the purposes of our conversation today, I'm curious how you would conceive of the term as it applies to art history as a discipline, and also as it's practiced in institutional settings like the university or the museum. So, Niall, I'll baton pass this to you, because you were one who raised the question that the term canon is not just something that applies to art history--it applies to literature and other fields. But of course, it's a term that is carried a lot of weight in our field, to put it mildly.

Niall Atkinson
The canon in art history is something that really dominates in a way unlike other disciplines. And I'm not exactly clear why that is or why I feel it's that way. However, I do think that it has to do with the way in which at least, people like me and my generation, were formed as art historians from the undergraduate level. In fact, even in high school, I internalized the Western canon of art history through successive iterations of a historical narrative, right through the five years of my high school career, so that we began with ancient Egypt in 9th grade and in 10th grade we did Greece and Rome and in 11th grade we did medieval and so on, and we ended up in the 20th century. And so when I went to university, the university survey reinforced that by following the same narrative with primarily the same kinds of images and objects and monuments...probably widening it, because maybe it had become a bigger canon at that point. So I'm

not sure if I was really aware that this was a canon that had been formed--it was just the kind of art history that I had been exposed to. When I got to university, I was exposed to enough counter narratives in our history, especially in my courses by--I didn't realize this then--essentially pre-doctoral teaching graduate students as well as postdoctoral fellows, who were teaching me a much more critical art history. And I got really, really excited about that. I became increasingly upset with the entire canon formation.

I very quickly decided that the whole canon of art history--the body of works that made up that core of what I had learned--needed to be thrown out. And so this became my early graduate school mission to do so. Recently, I have the most recent iteration of what we call the Proseminar at the University of Chicago, which is essentially our methods course, or historiography course, which has made me rethink the relationship we have to the canon because I taught that as a particular kind of narrative that began with Riegl and Wölfflin, late 19th-, early 20th century, and passes through figures such as Panofsky, and Edgar Wind, and Ernst Gombrich and Meyer Schapiro, and Michael Baxandall...this is a particular German narrative that begins in Austria in the 19th century.

And it is both the formation of a particular canon, which is very much centered around the Italian Renaissance--which is course is my specialty--and so places certain works of art at the center of art history, and works its way out from that. And of course, this particular narrative, historiographically, has become a kind of canon. And so I taught it not simply as a way to understand art history, but as a way to understand how art history was formed at a particular moment, in a particular conversation or dialogue, across the early to mid-20th century, and the way in which it constructed a canon and derived its principles from what it perceived to be the most important works of art.

What I think was happening in this narrative is that Germans were trying to develop a system by which they could establish art history as an independent discipline that had, in the German sense, a kind of scientific coherence to it. That it could then stand up to the test of being a disciplinary field of knowledge production. And of course, that meant isolating in certain ways, the work of art, in dealing with it with its own internal kinds of structures-- --building comparative analyses between works of art, and so there's a sense in which--especially in the early period--where the makers of art recede in a particular way. The artworks are the major focus, and the limits of that work of art are the

limits of what the art historical discipline is attending to. So that is how I understand that particular canon which led to the formation of the subfield in which I said, "the Italian Renaissance," as a way now to not necessarily throw it out--because I'm still trying to think of ways in which one has to deal with that canon because that's a whole intellectual tradition that has been built up around a series of discussions of works of art that one simply just cannot ignore. So my younger self that wanted to throw out the canon, I think is now trying to deal with my older self that is trying to deal with the canon in particular ways [through] training students in understanding the history of their own discipline. Because I think increasingly I felt, as I was transitioning from my Master's into my PhD studies, that I was increasingly unmoored. What I did not know about the building blocks of the discipline (in terms of its research and the works of art that helped construct it) was leaving me in too untethered a space to be a good art historian.

Min Kyung Lee
I think the way that you've described your Proseminar is in some ways the best sense of the idea of the canon: that the idea that you're trying to teach is a canon that's collectively developed and that it's ever changing. It maps onto social relationship over time, across space, among different scholars having this conversation and so you agree upon some references so that you can have a conversation and share something, right? So the canon serves as this means to have a conversation and to build upon that, a discipline, like art history that was, at the end of the 19th century, trying to formulate itself against philosophy, or some of the other humanistic disciplines. I think, in the worst case, the canon is something that is imposed upon you, and that it's just delivered as if saying, "These are the greatest hits." And you don't question the quality of these works and the master works. When Linda Nochlin wrote that essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, that was a clear sign that you can't impose these works on students. It's a kind of form of elitism.

To trace a different trajectory, when I went to undergrad, I majored in art history. I didn't have exposure to art history before university, and the first art history class that I took was not in Western art or architecture, but it was Renata Holod's survey of Islamic art and architecture. And for me, that was my introduction to art history. And I think that was really telling of the kind of experience... it wasn't presented as a canon. She presented these works in a

fashion that didn't make the Western canon and European arts a reference. This was its own thing. It had its own specific histories and contexts, etc.

But on a different note, the way that I experienced the canon was deeply personal. It felt like art history as an undergrad was joining some kind of elite social club. Coming from a working-class immigrant family and learning about these artworks, it felt like I was entering into, on one hand, an amazing world of beauty and just such great cities and places that I had never thought of before, like Florence or Paris. But at the same time, it was a place that I had to earn my entry into. It wasn't a given for me. And so it wasn't that I knew consciously that this was the canon, I just understood that this is what art history was as an undergrad: whether it was the Islamic world and thinking about the Ottoman Empire, or whether it was Paris or Florence or any of these great European cities...so, that's what I mean that the worst sense of the canon is that which is imposed on you uncritically and almost as a kind of gatekeeping. But I like what you're saying about how you're trying to reformulate it--the canon as an ongoing conversation that's ever-evolving—it includes current scholars and students invested in developing and questioning these shared references.

Niall Atkinson
I think you're right. What you said about the imposition of the canon I think is the key here. I don't think it's the so-called canon itself. The canon is--from the way in which I understand it--is always information. There are members of this narrative who went down the path of a racist ideology, in line with the history of Germany in the 20th century. However, as we all know, many of them were also refugees from that very persecution, who ended up in Western Europe and in the United Kingdom, and in the United States as well. And, as you know, some of ended up in the University of Chicago. And so I think that when the canon is used to precisely do that--to impose upon your way of thinking--as opposed to you being part of a dialogue of what a historical narrative can be, then it becomes instrumentalized into something that shuts people out. I recently had a colleague say exactly the same thing in a faculty meeting: that she thought originally, that art history is what rich kids studied, and she didn't know that anyone else could, either. And so I think that's connected to what you're saying, as well: that the canon can be part of a history that one deals with, and one can engage with...and I think that one can both resist, inflect, and encounter and continue to work with it, as well.

Min Kyung Lee
I like about what you're saying about this conversation-- about the canon as this ongoing dialogue. It's not just a matter of adding new works, or new names, to the list of masterworks. Linda Nochlin's question is irrelevant now. So what you're saying, I think, is that it's about changing the structure of how certain works are placed within this structure, and about being critical of the structure and the relationship that undergirds the study of these works.

Niall Atkinson
Yes, you made me think about something there...I would say that Linda Nochlin's question is relevant historically because it started a conversation in which we understood precisely why that question was asked and why the question was insufficient. And it opened up that for us a great deal.

Anne Helmreich
I absolutely feel that way about analyzing the systems and structures. That definitely animates my work on the art market. I want to ask the question, "What was the relationship, in some cases, between the academic historiography you're talking about, Niall, and the art market, and many of these same people?" Particularly, focusing on the 19th- and 20th-century UK, where there's a slightly different formation of the discipline, in a university academic setting, than there was in Germany, or even the US. What was recognizable as art history is often enacted by people who are moving quite fluidly between the market and art writing and university lecturing. And so, what are the intersections between so-called knowledge formation, and what happens in the marketplace in order to validate/produce pedigrees for works of art? What work gets a pedigree? What is meant by pedigree? That sounds a lot like canon formation to me. So if we think about how dealers performed.... your conversation makes me think of something we talked a bit about when we all came together, at the Clark in Williamstown. So, pivot a little bit from the canon to thinking about the social history of art, because the social history of art engages with the social conditions that shaped the production and reception of art. And I think it's offered a promise of democratization in a way of dismantling the canon through attending to these conditions of production/reception...to some of these kinds of systems and structures we've been talking about. On the other hand, if we look at some of the most central texts in the social history of art, like in our conversation in Williamstown, we were talking quite a bit about TJ Clark, for example, they tended to focus on artists, in that case, who already

figured in the canon. A Courbet or Manet. I'm speaking from my field of 19th century. Now you both work in different fields and engage with the social history of art. I'm curious from the perspective of your particular area of research practice and teaching practice, how you view this question of the relationship between the canon and the social history of art? Has that dynamic been part of those conversations?

Min Kyung Lee
I think that since Clark, obviously, the social history of art has changed a lot. And again, I can understand the pivot that you made, because it's more than just taking other artworks and adding it to this list of works that we should consider as important or significant. I think there is a question of how we're thinking about knowledge production itself: thinking about the basics of and being critical of our hermeneutics...about our epistemological genealogies...where they come from and how these questions are being asked of these objects, and not just objects of art, but using those questions to think about visual culture or, in my field--built environment--more generally.

One of the aspects that is important in this method and subfield of the social history of art is about its own intellectual heritage. I can give a concrete example of how this is playing out in my recent research. So my primary area is 19th-century Paris, the built environment and mapping that city. I mean, it cannot be more canonical, and especially the period of Hausmann. I've shifted now to working on built environments, mainly whose stakeholders are marginal agents...for example, the commercial streets, in African American neighborhoods, in Philadelphia, New York, various cities. Then thinking about the commercial spaces that are owned and managed by immigrants--mostly Korean immigrants--and mapping them and tracing them. And what has come out in this research for me is...and clearly these are not canonical in architectural history terms--they don't necessarily have even an architect named on some of these buildings. But the questions that social art history has asked are still relevant, right? Who are the stakeholders? What is the social/political context? That's very basic. What are the ways in which we can get at arriving and deriving meaning from these spaces? And so this means something much more than going into an archive. Not just looking at state documents or official documents and supplementing them with newspapers. It means actually thinking about an archive in a completely different way, developing a new archive, a new archive with different voices, and then figuring out a means to capture those voices. And

so, this is just a small example of how I'm thinking about the social history of art, that is also about hermeneutics, it's also about our biases, and what we consider as knowledge production.

Niall Atkinson
That is fascinating, that pivot that you were making, Min. It resonates in the way in which the whole social history of art for me was looking at the infill between the kinds of canonical monuments in a city like Florence (that I've been working on)...[the monuments are]integrated into the social life of that city at any given moment...from which the monuments have been extracted by the art historical canon. So the canon, in that sense, has done its own kind of surgical strikes in terms of this architectural world. I think the social history of art allows you to bind those things back together because, by following the various social relationships, you see that the people are not making those distinctions. They don't suddenly run into an empty space that is not meaningful anymore, between the palace and the church, for example. I think that is really important and analogous to the ways in which I was just imagining the canon, say, in more visual terms, and in the narrative I was talking about earlier.

The works of art have also been extracted from the context in which they have been viewed, even if that viewing takes place in a more modern contemporary sense, in our private homes and private collections, but also public galleries and museums...those are the kind of social contexts in which art lives now. That was, for me, the real mind-blowing impact that encountering TJ Clark in the '90s, for me was that all of a sudden, the 19th-century art that had always existed in its pedagogical mode, as images on a flat surface on a screen against a neutral background, we're suddenly immersed in art history's dirty secret of the economics and power relationships and the class relationships, just as much as any other sector of the economy. And that would completely transform the way one would look, I think, for me, at a work a work of art, and that kind of in embeddedness is similar to the way in which you and I are both are approaching cities like Florence and Paris. Because in that case, I think what the social history of art helps us do is expose the mechanisms by which the canon...or who gets to say what the canon is and what we do with it, right? Because you were talking, Anne, about the way in which you were able to show the fluid relationships between intellectual pedagogy, the buying and selling of art and the very valuations between monetary and anesthetic valuation, in your work, and the ways in which those things are constantly intertwined. That money is also

helping us determine a canon in which we imagine...that the enemy is these elite groups of people that are doing so, but it's not them necessarily by themselves. I think there are some other kinds of forces in which the canon is being formed, that are being a little bit sanitized in both how we have traditionally talked about the work of art, and how we've also talked about who decides what a valuable work of art is. I think the social history of art can provide the kinds of critical analysis that helps us to undermine those structures--and make those structures visible.

Min Kyung Lee
I love that metaphor. It's like the connective tissue between all the organs, that makes those organs function.

Niall Atkinson
It's the body metaphor of the city. Right?

Anne Helmreich
I really appreciate the point you're lifting up about rereading and rethinking the work of art in the built environment. It's that foreground/background dynamic too, and that connective tissue isn't the background--it is the thing itself. And I think that goes to your point too, Min, about rereading the archive--asking, what reconstitutes the archive? So what's our object of focus here? And the ability to actually, as you said, infill that connective tissue--make *that* the object of focus, while interrogating what were the processes that led these other things? These icons to have at one moment in the historiography been selected out or plucked out.

That notion of a dynamic between foreground/background brings me to another thing we talked about in Williamstown that I wanted to bring up. It brings us to the digital, because we talked about how a number of digital projects have this kind of zooming up or zooming down quality. And I know both of you are interested in mapping and have worked in mapping projects. So I'm wondering how you feel that the digital or computational intersects with these points we've been making about the social history of art and perhaps again, that promise of helping us democratize our subjects of analysis, or [rethink] where our focus should be. And maybe, Niall, I'll start with you. I've always been a fan of your project on sound, which made me rethink the relationships and modes of perception and rethink the built environment. So I'll hand off to you first

Niall Atkinson
Thank you, Anne. For me, for someone who was trained to really look closely at something, that “scaling back” has been liberating in a way...the metaphor I use is a film I saw when I didn't know what it was. And I kept on going back to see it at the Science Center when I was growing up in Toronto, and it happened to be one of the most famous films by a modern architect, which is called "Powers of Ten." Yes, the Eames film. The way in which every 10 seconds was 10 times further, and the regularity and expansion and the breathtaking-ness of the monotony of just every 10 seconds, the frame gets 10 times bigger, was really helpful for me in trying to broach the relationship between...if you imagine what the work of art is, you know, the man lying in the park asleep, which is the center of the frame, right, and then...it's getting back to the universe, of course, and all the successive stages that one saw or experienced on that way...that vertiginous way in which you're rushing back away from the Earth.

I think that the computational methods, for me in the way that I'm sort of struggling to use them--and I can't say that I have broken the code or anything like that--in terms of how they might intersect in a very robust way with the social history of art. Except that right now, what I was trying to do, by transferring from my work on sound, which was the process of analyzing texts primarily, and images, and trying to understand space through them in Renaissance Florence. This was a way [to test] my hypotheses about the ways in which moving vectors of sound, and the dispersion of various sounds, actually did create, or inflect, architectural space to create these kinds of ephemeral, meaningful symbolic spaces at particular moments...that bound together social communities and social spaces. So, voices and bells, singing and processions and things like that, as well.

The idea was to think about possibly using complex computational methods to map sound dispersion, not to reconstruct an immersive environment, but to create the systems of spatial relations that sound could produce within the city. So to see whether or not that such loud voices, collective voices, singular voices, singular bells, choreographies of bells, actually would have been meaningful, or could be meaningfully heard in the ways the sources seemed to be telling me...I was really struck by attending to what people wanted to talk about in their city, which was how much they were listening to it. This countered, in a way, the elite view of Renaissance architecture for me. In my field, we have had a tendency to

go to specific sources. And those specific sources are usually connected to the design and production of architecture at the elite level--levels of authority, like governments and churches and bureaucracies working with elite artists and architects. But instead, I think that sound allows me to get to places where you could listen to the ways in which architecture was experienced, because of the kind of near-universal literacy in the audible world. So here sound was something that could get us out of the purely literary and into a zone where a wider notion of society was participating in particular dialogue with their city.

So the problem is, of course, how does one map this? But at a very fundamental level, because we're still in initial stages in this particular project...we're using the 1427 tax census of Florence as a guide. So here we have what is reputed to be the first modern tax assessment in Europe, in which they were overhauling the system in Florence to figure out on a proportional basis, based on the net worth of individual households, how much tax did they owe at tax time? And so, all heads of households had to make this declaration. And it is based on these declarations that we have been able to see what the kind of topographic...or real estate portfolios that individuals had. So people talked about where they live, they talked about who their neighbors are to locate themselves in space. And they talk about rental properties they have, or places that they themselves rent, and this gives you the sense of the ways in which there's a kind of equalization, so that each property has the same kind of formulaic protocol in description. Even if you're describing what would be a major familial domestic piece of property, it sits next to other properties just like everything else. So because we have, in this case, all of the infill and all the privately-owned property in the city, set in relation to every property that bounds it, there's a way in which that demystifies, which is something that I think the social history of art is good at doing. Here's a computational method, I think that helps us to demystify some of the major monuments of the city, because they are simply pieces of property next to other pieces of property. Each is distinguished, ultimately, by the amount of money that one has to pay for it, of course, which is then part of the whole tax register. But it gives you a really interesting sense of the way in which Florentines imagine themselves because their voice is speaking about who they are, where they are, in the city. And each household tells a similar kind of story.

Anne Helmreich
Min, I'd love to hear from you. And in your experience of thinking through digital or computational methods in relationship to some of these questions about

carrying out the social history of art in this way that we're talking about rethinking the object, rethinking the built environment. So because I was also thinking about the ways in which some of these retail spaces in your current research are also in some ways...have in some urban centers been rendered ephemeral because of urban renewal, so-called urban renewal projects?

Min Kyung Lee
Well, I was just thinking about this question of scale, that Niall brought up, and I think that's really central to digital and computational methods, because the scale at every single point of research is so different. So Niall, you had the example of "Powers of 10," and moving in and out. And that's actually one of the issues in my new research project related to mapping, which is that, on the one hand, the project is about this microscale, thinking about each specific store space, and then within each retail space, the zones where certain kinds of actors are allowed--that certain kinds of social negotiations happen between primarily women, and thinking and really looking at things on a microscale and figuring out what is the best way to represent that? GIS has some great tools, but somehow, it's unable to capture...as with all maps, it's very reductive. But then there's the other story, which is that how do these very specific places that were given meaning by very specific actors, and under certain political and economic conditions, how do they function within the global scale of the Cold War economies, exports? Export economies, migration--that's on a totally different scale. And here's where again, you can use mapping tools to trace the material objects across the globe.

But what happens--and this is a general problem with digital and computational methods and maybe the way in which social art history also doesn't necessarily align--is that, what I'm having trouble with is figuring out: what are the historical methods that one can use to connect all these different scales together? The narratives that you have to compose and weave that can marry both this very large scale, and the amount of data that you use to compose these images. How do you write a narrative of that, that then is also connected to this very microscale, and everything in between? And that's for me a central question about the digital intersecting with the social and the goals and intentions of what the social history of art is.

At least for me, the digital and computational methods are mainly used to help produce images and representations of these sites that helped me to then

analyze the spaces and derive meaning from them. But it's been really difficult to think about how to weave that into textual narrative, and then also combine it with this new kind of oral archive that I'm trying to build. So that's maybe one answer to the question.

The other ways in which I think the digital computational and social art history meet, or don't meet, is this question of labor. So one aspect that has been so different, and a lot more fun, honestly, is that this project requires so many different people. I can't do it alone. And so there are grad students who are doing the drawings and doing the measuring. And then there are other students who are helping with the mapping...I have students who have been working on data collection, so we go through business directories to identify addresses, and then you have to turn that into actual data that can be put into a spreadsheet and then spatialized, etc. So even just going through that process, and as Niall was saying, demystifying that process has been great. But the other thing is that it's so much more collaborative. And I think that is an aspect that's really valuable, that digital computational methods is bringing into art history that has long been a solitary project--you produce your monograph--and it makes it much less egocentric.

It means that the work itself also is a product of your social network and the community that you're building. That ties in, at least for this project, because it's really about the built environment--it ties into a lot of the civic goals that I have, that are meant to reach beyond just the books or articles or images that'll come out of it-- but really a social engagement through research.

Niall Atkinson
That's, I think, a really fascinating way in which you've articulated the relationship between your intellectual method, or historical methodology, and your practice as an art historian in the world right now....those two things being linked, right? When you're speaking, I'm thinking, yes, the demystification of the proper names of the Renaissance that are alienating insofar as they're always set up to be towering over their own time, and therefore, for us art historians as well. And so I think that this whole issue of labor and the collaborative mode...this is one of the most important things that computational methods have allowed me to do. To learn how to collaborate in a really robust way, and really rethink and be critical of what authorship means. Because even when I wrote a solitary book, I mean, think of all the people that you have to thank to

get there. That you never would have gotten there without. It's analogous. It's also labor. But it's not a formal structure, right? The Renaissance studio was very much like this as well. Ultimately, we put one name [on a project], but there are massive collaborations going on there that are then hidden within the canonical veneer, which attaches names to works of art and monuments and things like that. And I think that's important too, because it makes us critical of our own practice, and our implication in perpetuating certain forms of art history, through the very way in which we go about doing the art history.

I think there's a wonderful, analogous thing too that I see in my own work that you were articulating in terms of your research about the kind of the zooming in and out...the way in which individual objects or the design of specific spaces, and the people who inhabit them, are connected to a much more globalized economy, whether that be migration, or the circulation of goods. Articulating that connection is an important goal for a social history of art that's based on a computational method. [This will] help us think about our historical project in useful ways.

In some of the works that I'm looking at now, which are descriptions of foreign cities by travelers, I'm discerning a common way in which they first try to take into account the generalized geography in which a place sits, and they often walk around the walls to get a sense of the scale of the city, and then they enter into the city, and they get a sense of the layout of the streets. And then they begin to talk about how people are acting or what they're doing in those streets. So there's a way in which they're doing that zooming in as they're approaching a city as a way of trying to understand it and get a sense of their bodily relationship to it in terms of scale, and then to populate it with the kind of social activities that such a city allows or facilitates. This is something that I've written about, as well, that is reflected in the way in which someone like Alberti, the architectural theorist, in terms of using such a scalar model to found good design principles. In other words, that architecture and cities can be understood as, you know, his six different modes, from area and locality, to the individual footprint of a building, to the network of spaces inside it, to the windows, doors and roofs, that make up the structure of buildings at that granular level. He's talking in this sense only structurally. He's not at this moment adding the social component, but he understands design as either a way of thinking holistically and then going to detail, or thinking about details and working back out into the larger way in which individual design fits into a larger community of structures, for example.

All of that seems to be resonant or reflective in the kinds of methods that computational modes allow one to do. But I think possibly in my case...have allowed me to see my own subject…

Min Kyung Lee
The important thing is going to be--and maybe this is also another objective of the social history of art--is to make sure that those scales are kept linked. That you keep that connective tissue, to use this metaphor, across those different scales, because I think precisely if each one of them is treated as its own autonomous object, you lose both the ways in which the global and the micro are constitutive of each other.

Niall Atkinson
Precisely. That's a difference, say, between analyzing a room, for example, as an object of design, versus analyzing a building, versus analyzing neighborhood. Digital technologies help us to maintain those links because of the power and speed of some of the computation. Once the whole team that you have has put the labor into...to build that infrastructure, which, as you know, is a great deal of investment of human time.

Anne Helmreich
I want to appreciate what I'm hearing from this conversation, because Niall, you used the word "alienating." And I think when we talk about researchers, data, and spreadsheets, and database, and GIS--that feels alienating. Data has no weight, or it's all weighted equally. But in fact, what I hear from this conversation is the stakes that you feel in doing this work--that you see your work is contributing to the social engagement stakes of it, the stakes of a communal labor, the stakes of creating a community together. The critical engagement with practice. And then the stakes that are part of creating the perspectives of multiple actors, and the stakes that are laying bare these systems, these economic systems, these systems of power and class. And your point that we have to constantly be finding that connection between the local and the global, between the one example and the larger fabric to be able to really understand these systems and how these dynamics of power, class, gender, race are all playing out. Because otherwise, the full dynamic, for want of a better word, is not really understood. Instead it's an isolated going back to the canon, to one singular instance.

Niall Atkinson
In terms of the sort of the collaborative mode, I don't want to gesture towards a totalizing art history, where this particular thing has shown us everything...but to keep it as a system of relationships that are numerous and will constantly multiply, right? You can enter into certain patterns or a certain series of those relationships. That's part of the larger dialogue in which you're already collaborating in a particular project, but that project itself is then sitting beside or is informing other projects, as well. The larger dialogue helps to continually build out from there. There is value in the zooming in, and pausing for certain moments and a particular scale, and for zooming out. The zooming in and out doesn't necessary have to be done by one single art historian or one single team. I think that that the social history of art is also a social community of art historians. That is both a network and a method, perhaps, is how I'm thinking of it, based on what you've just said there.

Min Kyung Lee
What you were saying, Anne, just made me think of another point, which is that, for me, and for Niall, what we're describing are projects that are about creating data. So it's not that we are using data sets that have already been organized and produced for use. And I think that's a really important distinction. Because when you are at the level where you have to produce data to be used computationally--because you have to produce those numbers--you have to confront all of the structural issues that go into what defines that translation. And those include: what are the categories that we use? How are we going to search for these specific terms? Or, what are all the biases that one has to confront? And so, I think it's not alienating precisely because we're seeing the entire production process. That's an important point to make about digital and computational methods: where are *you* in that process of research?

Niall Atkinson
You have to make those decisions at every turn. Good data just doesn't build itself. So you become very much involved in a particular construction of particular relationships. But the decisions that you make...

Anne Helmreich
I couldn't agree with you more. They're all intellectual choices that you're going to have to rationalize and live with for the life of the project. So it's not an art.

Min Kyung Lee
And that goes back to the very first questions that you asked, Anne. What is the canon? And what is social art history? And I think those manifest in how we're defining what data we use, how we produce it.

Anne Helmreich
How might you be using digital or computational in your teaching practice? Are you introducing students to it? Or is it part of some of these communal activities you're describing? We've heard a lot from your research practice. But I know you are both wonderful mentors to students in the field.

Niall Atkinson
The thing I'm trying to get students to think about, from my perspective is, how do you think spatially? Because I think that a certain kind of spatial thinking, for me, helps to inform the way in which I hope to, and I hope my students will also, use these technologies. So that they are critically in charge of what certain spatial visualizations tell them, or do, and how they're constructed. Another thing that I have done is, I've actually used colleagues' pedagogical methods in this case, and that was from the DECIMA [Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive] team at Toronto that produced step-by-step instructions on how to use their data interface with 16th-century Florence. I got my students to work through this, as a way of thinking about how you query certain forms of data. And then by asking certain questions of it, different kinds of visualizations will come up on the map about the kinds of questions you asked about, say, in this case, the number and residences of bakers at a particular neighborhood in Florence, for example...simple things like that. And then one of the things that I'm hoping to do in the next coming weeks with my students in Rome, is to get them to perform what has been called by the French, the situationists, from the mid 20th-century, a form of critical walking or critical wandering in cities that they call the *dérive*, or drifting, as a critical spatial practice. And so I get them to work in groups, and create random ways in which they can move through the city and they time themselves. And then they either built themselves little algorithms, or they literally just have a "rock, paper, scissors" contest in order to decide at every crossroads which way they're going to go. And then every 10 minutes, they stop, and they start describing their spatial environment, and the things that they see; they sketch what they see; they describe what they hear; they think about what the city there smells like; the kinds of people that are inhabiting the space; what they're doing...

[All this is a] way to get them to de-familiarize themselves with a city that is extremely familiar in certain ways to many of the students, and to force them to not constantly walk or choose to have the kinds of paths that get trodden over in a city like Rome, over and over the same way. And they end up in very, very strange places, which sometimes are, I wouldn't say menacing, but they are kind of strange, and they're not exactly sure how to approach them. But it gets them to think about the city in a different way. And to recalibrate how they can describe and understand and interpret the space around them. Those are the kinds of building blocks I'm trying to lay down for students to begin to think about what mapping (say, in this case) human movement might tell us about the city.

Min Kyung Lee
So I teach not in an art history department, but in a department [called] The Growth and Structure of Cities. It's a mix of architectural historians, architects, and social scientists. One of the classes that's offered in our curriculum is a GIS course. I haven't taught that, but I have a great colleague who does, and she's always looking for projects to give the students...so I give them these projects to create the data for mapping out these particular spaces that I'm interested in. So they often have this assignment of going through the archives and the business directories and trying to figure out why these categories might work...So that's been one way in which I've been involved...I take a similar tactic as Niall. I'm not in a position to offer courses on specifically digital and computational methods.

[My] goal as an architectural and built environment historian in this department is to teach spatial literacy. So that unfolds in all of my classes with various assignments--most of them are mapping. The idea is for the students to understand that these [maps are] not neutral objects and images, that they have their own histories, and they have ideologies behind their representational modalities, and to be able to assess them. So we look at everything from flood insurance maps, to producing their own maps… and not *dérives*, but similar walking experiments, and exercises where they have to record and produce different kinds of spatial representations themselves to understand some of the questions and decisions that go into these kinds of tools and images. I think that is related to teaching digital computational methods, because in any case, it's going to change in five years. So you have to teach something that's more meta, right? You have to understand the logic behind these methods and images.

Niall Atkinson
I think that's it's important, because what doesn't change, then, is the critical foundation that they have for adapting to new technologies. So that their own particular methods are structuring how the data are organized, how the tools are used, rather than vice versa.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to resources referenced in the conversation, please visit Clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caroline Fowler and me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing by John Buteyn, music by lightchaser, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Jessie Sentivan. 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 building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.