

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

**“A DATABASE IS AN ARGUMENT”:  
ANNE HELMREICH ON DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND ART  
HISTORY**

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**Transcript**

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode, I speak with Anne Helmreich, an art historian and digital humanist, who since April 2020 has been associate director of the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles, and was formerly the associate director of Digital Initiatives at the Getty Research Institute. A specialist of 19th-century art, for nearly 15 years she and has explored the possibilities of what the digital humanities might open up for art history, and how art history in turn, might productively challenge the digital humanities.

**Anne Helmreich**

*What do we consider scholarship? Is it creating these core foundational things that others can draw from? Or is it making an original argument? We've tended toward the original argument side, right? And I think, you know, in some ways a database... there are plenty of people who would argue a database is an argument.*

**Caro Fowler**

Well, thank you for joining me, Anne. It's really nice to see you and I'm excited to talk to you today.

**Anne Helmreich**

Oh, me too. It's been too long, it's been too long. So, thank you.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, my pleasure. So usually, we kind of warm up with questions of training or intellectual training. I would love to hear how you became an art historian, and was there a formative professor at Dickinson? Or was there a course that really changed your understanding of what art history could do?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, thank you. Actually, you know, as somebody who was a former professor and a former dean, I like to tell this story because I would have never picked the career path of art historian for myself. Although in hindsight, I can see, you know, little breadcrumb trails, like, you know, my grandmother on my mother's side belonged to an art club, so her house was full of books about art. So, you know, looking back, I can imagine. But that's not what I thought I would do when I went to college. I mean, I picked my college because I wanted to go to law school. I was very clear about that. And right up to the last minute, so... [laughs]. But I think the formative experience... Dickinson is a small liberal arts college, really emphasizes a study abroad experience -

**Anne Helmreich**

- and really emphasizes learning about other cultures. So I did my study abroad experience in Vienna with the Institute for European Studies. And at that time, I was a history major. So history was a frequent pathway to law at Dickinson because they had a number of courses on, like, the history of the law, history of the Constitution -

**Caro Fowler**

Mhm.

**Caro Fowler**

Right.

**Anne Helmreich**

- and also a very strong political science department, as well as art history. But I had, I had taken the sort of typical survey art history courses. And I enjoyed

them, but just didn't, you know, didn't think of that as a career path. And then in Vienna, I took a course there with a history professor who taught the history of Vienna by walking through the city, by experiencing the city's monuments and buildings, and I just thought, well, why isn't history taught this way, all the time?

**Anne Helmreich**

Why don't we, why don't we learn history from these material artifacts?

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs]

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So you know, I will date myself. I wrote a letter on that airmail paper to my undergraduate history advisor and just like, how much I love this course, and did he know of any more history courses like this that I could take. And he wrote back and was like, "Anne, there's this discipline called art history." [Laughs]

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs]

**Anne Helmreich**

And so I took a few more art history courses in Vienna, which was just fantastic, right? I mean, you know, so we get an assignment, you know, "learn about Dürer." "Now, go to the Albertina and learn how to order up a print from the print study room and have them brought to you." I mean, I just had no idea, you know, that that world existed. So if I was still on the law school track. So, took LSATS and was -

**Caro Fowler**

Oh, wow.

**Anne Helmreich**

- interviewing for law schools. And at a school that shall remain nameless [laughing] - but I should be grateful to them - I was looking through the catalog while I was waiting in the lobby for my interview slot. And I started looking at the courses they had for art history and for museum studies. And I was like, God, these look really good. So at the end of my interview, you know, when they asked you that, "Do you have any questions for us?" and say, oh, does anybody ever do a double degree in art history and law? And the woman interviewing me is like, "Are you having trouble deciding what you want to do?" And I was like, oh, I am.

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs]

**Anne Helmreich**

And I came home, and I withdrew all my applications.

**Caro Fowler**

Wow.

**Anne Helmreich**

And then I negotiated with my parents and said, I will find a job in the legal field. So I worked for an insurance company. And then I will find out more about this art history museum studies business. So I took a couple of my courses at the University of Pittsburgh, which is where I ended up earning my MA. And then worked at a children's museum on the weekends and evenings. So I, you know, I found out a little bit more about that world. And the more I found out, the more I liked it. So, here I am.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, it's amazing. So then you went on to Northwestern, is that right?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah. And now I'll do one last back tie-

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, please.

**Anne Helmreich**

- to my undergraduate, is, after I finished my dissertation and I was giving a paper with the art historians conference in the UK -

**Anne Helmreich**

Mhm.

**Anne Helmreich**

- and my undergraduate Professor Sharon Hirsh was on the panel. And can I just tell you, you know, how exciting that is. Like, I'm up here with, you know, the person who taught me. And then she invited me to be in an edited volume. And then again, it's one of those moments where, like, "You're interested in national identity... Oh, that's where those questions I have come from. You were probably planting the seed as an undergraduate and I didn't even know it." But they became these sort of niggling questions that I took with me, you know, on my journey. So, again, it's that idea that you don't quite know, maybe at the time, and then later, you're like, oh, that, that was actually probably pretty important [laughing].

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs]. Yeah. So who did you study with at Northwestern, then?

**Anne Helmreich**

I studied with Hollis Clayson. And the years I was at Northwestern, were just, I mean, the program was great. But I also felt very fortunate because when I went I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to focus on 19th or 20th century. But the moment I was there, Hollis was there - fabulous advisor to have. Michael Leja was

teaching the American materials, so really strong 19th-20th century. And Nancy Troy was there. So I had the opportunity... I mean, I took courses also with Whitney Davis, you know, Karl Werckmeister, Sandy Hindman was the chair of the department... I mean great constitution of faculty. David Van Zanten, I took courses for architecture. So I just, I feel like I got a fabulous training.

**Caro Fowler**

I've heard Hollis talk about Paris versus London -

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah [laughing].

**Caro Fowler**

- for the 19th century [laughing]. Did she forgive you for studying London? [Both laugh].

**Anne Helmreich**

Exactly. But I think that's all of Hollis's credit.

**Anne Helmreich**

Because, you know, I told her, I said, my questions keep returning me here as almost like a comparative example or testing these other hypotheses. And she was willing to sort of say, yeah, also, you know, it's not a practice the department's been able to continue as it's grown. But at that time, everyone read your exams, everyone read your perspectives.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

In the department?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah. So I mean, I got great feedback from, you know, Whitney, Whitney Davis, who works on material other than what I work on primarily. So I think that multi-dimensional perspective that we got through our training, that particular sets of cohorts, was really invaluable. So I think in that sense, yes, of course you want, you know, the people in your period, who know your archival, your primary, secondary sources. You absolutely want that. But I think also, having these interactions with people outside your sort of primary area of focus was really invaluable, too.

**Caro Fowler**

So then, kind of moving forward in your career, what was the moment in which digital art history opened up to you as a field? Or when did you get introduced to the digital humanities?

**Anne Helmreich**

It's a great question. So I became director of the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities at Case Western University. So as a faculty member there, and then assistant director and then became director. And my appointment as director nearly coincided with the appointment of a new dean, who came out of physics but very interdisciplinary, Cyrus Taylor. And so when I came in as a director, you know, I sat down with him, let's plot out the future, where do we want the center to go? We wanted to apply for NEH Challenge grant. And he said, "Well, and I also want you to think about digital humanities." I was like, uh, what's that? [Both laugh]. So I was like, okay, I had my homework, you know, what to do before my next meeting with the dean and there was some great people - Tom Knab who's since passed away, but was the Chief Information Officer for the college -

**Caro Fowler**

Mhm.

**Anne Helmreich**

- and he'd been very involved in internet to consortium and other... so he really kind of opened that door. And then colleagues in the library. So long story short, I became really interested and engaged with the digital humanities through that lens. But I told the dean, I said, you know, I really don't think it's possible for the director to advocate this pathway without thinking about it-, like, adopting it myself, right? I need to - and you know, maybe it's you learn from doing - so how could I say that the center should take up this strand of activity, if I didn't try it myself.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So I, working with some colleagues in the library, started a small digital humanities project just looking at Whistler. And then I - James Abbott McNeill Whistler - and then from that, I'm like, I really want to study the market. That's a great way to do it.

**Anne Helmreich**

And I did NEH Summer Institute. So again, kudos to the NEH, led by Tim Tangherlini out at UCLA -

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Okay.

**Anne Helmreich**

- on Network Analysis in the Humanities. And that turned out to be an absolute who's who of both, you know, the people he had lead that workshop, and then the people who participated, who've gone on - you know, that was over 10 years

ago - have gone on to be major players in the field. So that was a hugely formative experience.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

And I think that notion, I would, you know, advocate that for anyone, if that's something you want to go into and you don't have the background. You know, take up one of those opportunities to do a deep dive along with a cohort, because that cohort learning experience was great. Having the expertise leading us was great. And then the opportunity to advance your own research project inside that envelope was fantastic. So yeah, so that's, that's how I came to, you know, sort of both advocate for it and practice it [laughing].

**Caro Fowler**

And what did you find were the questions that digital humanities opened up for art history that, that you weren't able to ask, or that weren't being asked otherwise?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, well, you know, the thing that I was trying to research at the time, I mean, I couldn't do it without digital humans. So I was trying to look at - back to your question about London - Paris [both laughing]. I started looking at the art dealership to appeal that had a house that its main focus was in Paris - the business had started in Paris - but it had a branch in London. And I got interested in the London branch because they were the house that helped to introduce Impressionism into Britain. And so when I was working on my book, "Truth to Nature," and there was a huge debate about the degree to which Impressionism represented a moment of truth making or not. So I wanted to look at what paintings were coming in, what were people seeing when they, you know, if they use that term? What exactly did they mean? And so I got interested in that dealer, and then I got interested in the whole, you know, the business side of it.

So their records are out at the Getty. So I had originally gone out on library grant, and so started going through the books to try and figure out what was bought and sold in London. Well, there's like transaction after transaction after transaction [both laughing]. So it was like, here's the rest of my life -

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

- inside books. Like, how am I ever going to answer this question? Well, at the same time, the Getty - I was so lucky - was building the database out of them.

**Caro Fowler**

Right.

**Anne Helmreich**

So then I could leverage that, and then apply these digital humanities tools to analyzing that data. So - you know, wrap it up - it was the ability to work at scale.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

There was no way I could answer that question about the relative role of London in comparison to the Paris house, in terms of which artists they handled, which buyers, the strength of transactions. If I had to do it, you know, in a paper archive line by line by line, I mean, you know, that's, I would never... that's all I would ever do. So, it gave me the tools to work at scale. It gave me the means by which to do assessments and analytical, but I couldn't do any other way. And then since then, you know, I've worked with text analysis, some spatial analysis.

**Anne Helmreich**

And each time I've chosen those tools, because they're the ones that helped me answer that particular question. I mean, I still work with paper archives. I still work directly with objects. But I mean, I really appreciate your question. Because what it's saying is, you know, what's the, what's the inquiry that's driving this? And I'm still a believer of, you know, start with the question, and then figure out what's the best way to answer this? What, what archival evidence do I have, what modes of analysis will work for this? If it's a close reading, it's a close reading.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. And I know that your work on the London art market has, you know, is part of a question about nationalism and emerging nationalism and ultimately ties into a very theoretical, historical set of set of arguments. But it also raises an interesting question about, about data and data sets. And it seems to me one of the reasons art history has struggled with digital humanities is that it struggled with data and thinking about data. And, and it's my own understanding is - talking to people in digital humanities - everyone is acutely aware of the arbitrary nature of data sets. But it seems like people outside of digital humanities are saying, "But your data sets are arbitrary." So I was just [laughing] - well, so no one is aware of that. So I would love to hear kind of your own thoughts on the ways in which art history, on which data challenges art history? And also, what art history makes possible for thinking in new ways of that data itself?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, it's a great question. And again, you know, I was a history major as an undergrad.

**Anne Helmreich**

And it was part of my undergrad training. We had a course in quantitative methods in history.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So, you know, we went through, for example, census books. So we went through archival evidence, and were, you know, sort of trained minimum level of statistics, I would say, you know, thinking about it through the lens of a historian. I think it's interesting that art history - that's not typically anything you would introduce to an undergraduate, much less a graduate student. Um, but I think it's also interesting that we don't, as a field, grapple with that. Not only for setting up our research inquiry, and -

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

- you know, when you talk to people, I completely agree - I think there's that anxiety in the field about arbitrariness. But keep talking to people, and you'll find they have a database.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So they'll say well, yeah, but I did it for my dissertation. Or, what we're discovering, too, - you know, when I was over in the Getty Research Institute - when people are sort of, getting ready to retire, they're like, but I also have these databases, who wants my databases? [Both laugh]. So I think we're often making and using them, because we've got the tools of Excel and things. Now,

are we making them well? [Both laugh]. That's another question. And yeah, and I think, I think that's where some of this, you know, arbitrariness comes in. And I think it's, you know, a good data set if you're making clear where that data comes from. What have you done to enhance it, to change it, annotate it? Ideally, you should leave breadcrumb trails about who annotated it. You know, this is something in the digital humanities we're trying to think about as different -, you know, if you have a collaborative project, and different people take passes through the data, how can we annotate it in ways that we can attribute and recognize the intellectual labor that's behind that? Because, you know, just framing the data... I mean, this is like, what semiotics sort of taught us.

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs].

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, maybe constructed next to other pieces of data. So, you know, fielding that data, assigning it... are we assigning it a label, are we assigning it a category, what do we mean by those labels and categories? What's being left in, what's being left out? You know, and then the metadata, the data about data. I mean, I just think some of it as being very, very conscious about the choices you're making, and documenting those choices. Like, leaving the breadcrumb trails for someone else to understand the choices you've made, in a way that also I think... you know this gets to something I know our field was also talking about: peer review.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

I mean if your argument rests on that database, you should let me see that database, I think, as part of peer review, and I should be able to sort of test the validity of that data set, if you will. Based on that...you know, it's called a data dictionary that you associate with that database that helps me understand the

choices you've made. So I think, you know, these are, these are all questions, and they're hard questions for our discipline, that often doesn't provide, sort of, core training. So we may not have a common language around that.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

We don't maybe have a set of common practices, and maybe that's okay. Because, you know, we've also seen fields struggle with common practices that people normalize and then realize later are horribly biased. But I... it's all to say, I think the struggle is real. And I also have sympathy for it, and I can understand why it's there. But we also all use databases all the time. Even if you say you don't have one for your own research - every time you're using a library catalog, that's a database.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, going to JSTOR, you're actually using a database. So we should actually care deeply about data and metadata, because every time you want to access an archive or a library, you're basically using a database these days. And your ability to find something is going to hinge on somebody's ability to surface up a label or a category or name in a way that you can find it and render it useful for your inquiry. So I think whether we like it or not, developing some sophisticated ways of thinking critically about databases... I think we probably need to start, you know, baking that into our ways of training, and in our ways of engaging in our research.

**Caro Fowler**

Have you started to see meaningful shifts within both graduate training that could allow for this? Or also within the tenure track rank, so that people are starting to take this kind of work more seriously towards tenure on a tenure file?

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, I'm seeing more emphasis, I would say, in the graduate training. You know, helping people think critically about the tools and how we're using them or access to information. Tenure track, I think it's an interesting question. I mean, the recently published - well, a couple years old now - CAA guidelines in digital scholarship should help.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

But I also think our field... you know, it used to be there was a day where if you sort of... indexes and edited collections and transcriptions, you know, those were all valid pieces toward tenure. But our field has moved away from that. So it may be part of a larger conversation about what, what do we consider scholarship? Is it creating these core foundational things that others can draw from? Or is it making an original argument? we've tended toward the original argument side, right? And I think, you know, in some ways a database - there are plenty of people who would argue a database is an argument. But [inaudible] explains why it can feel pretty inert [laughing] as compared to the normal ways we expect an argument to be presented to us in narrative prose form.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. Well, and I also find there's a way in which visualizations of data - I find very difficult to read. And it's also fascinating, right, as an art historian -

**Anne Helmreich**

Right.

**Caro Fowler**

- that supposedly works off the visual world. I think there was recently- was it Nancy Um who published an article on dissertations in CAA's reviews.

**Anne Helmreich**

Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

**Caro Fowler**

She visualized. It was some visualizations. And I got to them, and I was like "Ah!" [both laughing]. It's really interesting because they're supposed to make that more legible, no?

**Anne Helmreich**

Right. But they're a form of argumentation too, right?

**Caro Fowler**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

Exactly. And I think, you know, I think Johanna Drucker who's worked a lot, both in digital humanities, but also in data visualization. I mean, I think she has some very perceptive things to say about, you know, again, being very thoughtful about the ways in which we use visualizations - they're a rhetorical maneuver. So yeah, yeah. So this idea of, yes, they make legible, but they're making legible in the particular way in support of a particular argument [laughin]. So yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, no it's very interesting. Well, also, I guess one of my questions I had for you was about her and obviously this canonical article she wrote that kind of everyone seems to cite when digital art history camp comes up. And was it for a volume that you edited? Or did I make that up?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. Is there a digital art history? And, and I guess I-, do you think that's still a question people are asking, or do you think that it's now more entrenched in the discipline?

**Anne Helmreich**

Well, it's funny, because you mentioned to me that you were thinking about this. So I mean, I know Johanna, so I thought I'm gonna ask the source. [Both laugh]. So I reached out to her over Zoom, of course.

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs].

**Anne Helmreich**

And, you know, really nice conversation. But I think her answer is, yes, there is now a digital art history. I mean, because one of the key distinctions she was trying to make in that article was between a digitized art history, which is rendering the artifacts that we study in digital form by digital surrogates - which is important work in and of itself. But she was distinguishing that from digital art history as a practice that's sort of analytical in nature, argumentary in nature. And you know, what she said - and I would agree with her diagnosis - is that, these forms of analysis like image analysis, geospatial analysis, network analysis, that, you know, that there's tools and means of scholars to access those now that are much more achievable. I mean, you don't have to go get a PhD in electrical engineering to do some of this [laughing]. So that the computing power we have in our laptops, some of the programs that have been written allow us to, you know, take on that kind of work. I would add to that, too, that we're already seeing some of the configurations you associate with a kind of subdiscipline within a field, right? We have journals that support it, we have a caucus society within CAA. Now, whether it should remain a kind of subgroup within the field... I mean, I have questions about that. I mean, I think, you know,

having-, we talked about having been trained by Hollis Clayson, I would never want feminist art history just to exist in its own... [both laugh].

**Caro Fowler**

In its own pocket, yeah [laughing].

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, I think we do need to constantly rethink how we're teaching the survey in our textbooks. And I think it has a lot to say and offer the rest of the discipline, even if you're not working on women artists. I mean, I think some of the ways of thinking it deploys. And, and so I wouldn't, I would hope for a future that's like that for digital art history that, yes, you may have a set of scholars that very self identify their work around that, just the way you have scholars who self identify their work around feminist art history. But that there's field-wide awareness of it, and field-wide awareness of what critical perspectives it can bring.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So you know, because it's-, we're already living a field where much of our research materials are being presented to us in this digitized form. Once they are digitized, it makes them far more renderable for use in some of these, you know, digital approaches.

**Caro Fowler**

Right. Well, and it also seems to me that what you were saying earlier about art historians really critically thinking about data is so vital for a moment. And I, I'm not a computer scientist at all. And so to be hon-, I mean, still wireless is kind of a magical phenomenon to me. [Both laugh]. But, but, you know, it does seem that, for a moment in which people are so concerned about the cannon and the

making of the cannon, and what makes a cannon, it seems that as we are ourselves becoming data points in which all of the Google searches we do -

**Anne Helmreich**

Right.

**Caro Fowler**

- and the research that we do then informs the way that paths are made, and the ways that things are searchable, and the things that they populate - it seems that there's also-, should be an awareness around - how kind of as you say - our everyday use of these databases, is itself informing how things are searched and how things are defined and what rises to the top and what not...

**Anne Helmreich**

And I think taking-, building on your point, I think one of the things that I appreciate about a lot of digital humanities work is it's often done in partnership with the library. You know the library being as a repository, a knowledge repository, it's often where you find digital humanities centers being located. That it's an extension of the role of the librarian to be the, you know, "how can I help you think about learning these new tools and approaches?" So I think, you know, as art historians, if we can begin to think about how might we partner with our librarians, our archivists, museum collections information registrars, to kind of share and build knowledge together, I think could be really exciting for the field.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. Well and I think that was-, so that's another question I have about thinking about the ways - and this is just from my very small understanding - but there has been an extensive conversation in digital humanities about not assuming a universal language around the ways in which metadata is constructed, or code is written, or these things are performed and enacted. And so also, people have argued for kind of smaller, more local digital humanities projects. And I was just curious if you had some examples of those in art history, or if there were some

particular digital humanities projects in art history that really resonated with you in terms of dealing with these questions around not taking for granted a universal language of the ways in which digital humanities is practiced?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, I think it's, I think it's a great question. And I think it also sort of hinges on how we're defining local, you know?

**Anne Helmreich**

Because there's, there's a strand within digital humanities that's very much wanting to be community based. And the-, you know, when I think of that, um, you know, I think of ways in which people are using crowdsourcing or, you know citizen scientists to help inform. One of my favorite projects that's more art related is the Teenie Harris archive at the Carnegie Museum of Art, which I think is a really - and I could go on and on about it and it's, you know, from the part of the world I'm from so I'm biased [both laugh] - but it's an archive for an African American photographer who worked for the Pittsburgh Courier, a newspaper that's disappeared - I mean, gone.

**Caro Fowler**

Mhm. Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

The the building it was in, from what I understand, burned down. So there's no archive for that newspaper. He also had his own salon, like as a portrait photographer and just photographed his neighborhoods, civic events. Anyway, so his archives of photographs were left - about 80,000 images. But with no metadata to them, right?

**Anne Helmreich**

Because they were just his version. So we didn't have the newspaper folders with the caption or anything. And so the museum, you know, they did all these crowdsourcing projects where they went to the community and showed the images. And they've done various strategies, and they've done oral-, I think, over 150 oral histories, to help capture who are these people in these photographs. Because the neighborhood he lived in, in the Hill District in Pittsburgh, was partially-, I mean, pretty decimated by a highway that was run through in that moment of urban renewal where American cities were just gutted, particularly African American neighborhoods. So they've done these crowdsourcing, community-based approaches, but at the same time partnered with Carnegie Mellon University, and my colleague, David Newbury, who's now at the Getty, to do machine learning approaches to harvesting the metadata, but in a very, you know, less just descriptive way. So I think it's a lovely project that's both about, okay, how can we work at scale? We've got 80,000 images with no information about them [laughs].

**Caro Fowler**

Oh, okay.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

And how can we work locally? How can we work with the people from this community, who know some of these people in these studio portraits? Otherwise, how would we ever, ever know? So I think that's a wonderful example of kind of leveraging technology and leveraging community knowledge to make the archive - ostensibly the goal - to make it more accessible, you know, know more about him as a photographer, the places he photographed, the people who photographed... a moment of history, you know, of the city, nation. So, that may not be exactly what you had in mind.

**Caro Fowler**

No, it is. And I think that's a great example. No, that's, that's really interesting.

**Anne Helmreich**

But I was gonna say, I think Dominique, you know, she's, I think one of the things she's very wonderful about pointing out - and I have to check in with her and see where she is on this - but, you know, she wanted to work on a guide to racially sensitive cataloguing. And this is a, you know, project the field is really embracing right now. My colleagues at the Getty Research Institute are working on anti-racist language for collections and archives.

**Caro Fowler**

Wow.

**Anne Helmreich**

And I think you're right that this has been a long strand of thinking critically within the field of digital, because once we create the surrogate, and we label and call it something... and what forms of knowledge and then who has access to the digital surrogate and who doesn't? So I think, you know, there's a lot of ethics involved that the field's been thinking about for a long time. Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it seems that way to me, and and as you know, with one of the questions I shared with you, it was thinking of-, it was a question about how, obviously, this past spring with Black Lives Matter really taking a central place in our national conversation. So many fields are really, really openly grappling with questions that they have been for a while, but I think in a much more public way, and really trying to institute changes now in a way that will really have a lasting effect. And I know what, you know, I've read some-, in my small reading around digital humanities, it seems like there was initially a moment in which people-, there was kind of a strong statement that this is a field that came out of primarily white men computing in, I don't know, mid-century America [laughing], and how do we how do we make ch-, how do we make room for a post colonial turn in digital humanities? And, and so I would - I mean, you've already

addressed it in what you've said - but I would love to hear how, in your own period, our time in the field of digital humanities, how you've seen it change or grow and develop and thinking about these questions.

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, I think it's a great question. I think it also - at least for our field of digital history - I think it's also been part of a shift, a willing shift to shift from the solo scholar to a more collaborative model. Because I think what you're inviting reflection on is the ways in which we need to bring kind of multiple perspectives. And invite collaboration. So I think that's been part of it. You know, the Getty Foundation has been funding these workshops through which individual projects - yes, those are funded - but they all come back together for kind of cohort-based learning. So that willingness to be open, to learn through each other. And I think, you know, Paul Jaskot at Duke in the Wired! Lab has been doing this, too, to invite that critical reflection. And I think, you know, Paul's journey - I don't want to speak for him - but, you know, having come through the-, begun his worked in the digital humanities through that Holocaust project, which brought together a group of scholars. So I think, I think that collaborative model is really, critically important. And particularly choosing the people on that team, so you're not sort of self replicating [boh laugh] the knowledge and perspectives, but willingly in invite in -

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

- and say, let's grapp-, these are the things we need to grapple with. So I think that's really important for the field. And I think, you know, University of Maryland, the center there has been having some really important conversations and conferences on Black digital humanities. So -

**Anne Helmreich**

- you know, make sure the field is allowing multiple voices to contribute to it. You know, Matthew Gold and the others that have been doing the volumes on "Debates in the Digital Humanitie." You know, that they've been making sure that those volumes include that perspective. So I think we have to just keepmaking sure that it is, you know, an inclusive conversation and one that is also a place for debate, and self critical reflections. And, you know, continually use peer review - that's another place by which, you know, critical questions can be raised. I think the field is learning and growing. And I think that digital humanities, also... you know, there's a strong aspect of it that came from public universities, state universities, and that notion of, again, being kind of responsible to the communities that fund those universities - I think it's been important, too. So...

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. That's an interesting history to think about in relationship to these questions. And so also kind of-, how then do you think digital hum-, I mean, people say that digital humanities is also - and perhaps more specifically digital publishing - is upending traditional publishing models. But it seems especially in art history that the monographic hardcover book or the book, the book remains strong. And so I'd be curious, how do you do you have a sense of where things will be in 10 or 20 years? [Both laugh]. It's unfair to ask, to get you on the record for [inaudible]. I mean, do you think it is actually upending the model? Or do you think it's more that these two models are actually going to coexist for quite a long time?

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, I mean there's so many factors, right? So the print model, you know, depends on university presses, which is already a fragile economic model. What that's gonna look like post-COVID, when universities faced this economic downturn? Is that just gonna underscore the fragility of that model? I, I don't

have a crystal ball on that. So what's gonna happen to the print monograph that we associate with university presses in light of the economic downturn that higher ed is likely to experience, is already experiencing? So that's we can sort of put this-, that's one question I think we'll have to keep an eye on.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

I do, but, I do... even pre-COVID, we saw changes happening. My colleague, Greg Albers, at Getty Publishing - he helped to put together a study collaboratively with partners in Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, that came out in November 2019 on the online catalog. So focusing primarily on museum online catalogs, which was an area in which the Getty had run a grant-funded initiative - the Online Scholarly Catalog Initiative - which I helped to work on earlier. But even in the time between when that older initiative launched and Greg's study came out in 2019, they could measure a discernible shift in the field. Of scholars treating the online catalog as a reliable resource, and appreciating the global reach that these had -

**Anne Helmreich**

- including that, you know, that it was a way of access, and a way of equity and access, that the print catalog couldn't have because of the expense of the print catalog, that you have to be tied to a physical copy at a physical institution. So I think, I think that digital publishing has already gained more credibility in our field. And I think as we want to reach broader audiences, if we really want art history to be a global discipline, then we have to think about what does that mean in terms of publishing. Obviously languages, but also the format that we take it in. I think we also still have to ask ourselves, you know, what it's back to, what's the right tool? Am I gonna use a DH tool to answer my research question? What's the right format? I mean -

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

Mhm.

**Anne Helmreich**

- I would hope, you know, I hope that the book survives [laughs]. Because I do think long form arguments, you know, in a beautifully produced book... I'm old fashioned, you know, maybe I'm old fashioned -

**Anne Helmreich**

- call me old fashioned... But I, there's, there's something to that. I was proud as punch when Penn State sent me my copy of my truth to nature book [inaudible] [laughs].

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Caro Fowler**

[Both laugh]. It's a beautiful book.

**Anne Helmreich**

But I also appreciate - for example, I've worked with "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide," and pieces I've published in there I know have a farther reach than many of my paper form article. You know, a scholar I know in [inaudible], in Buenos Aires picked that up and then did a whole-, that helped trigger some of her research. So, and I also think we should be asking ourselves, what can we only do in the digital format?

**Caro Fowler**

Right.

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, we are working - my colleagues and I - are working for a piece for them right now in which we're going to have some digital reconstructions of spaces. To be able to show those models in a kind of three dimensional way, really, we couldn't do the same thing in a paper format. So, I think as we start to try and figure out different stories, we want to tell different narratives. The digital may, in some cases, be the best format. And I would hope as a field that we can be open to that. And if it's peer reviewed, it's peer reviewed. But that's the coin of the realm right?

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, of course, of course. No, your point about long form arguments in the book is really interesting. I mean, I hadn't thought about it that way. But it does seem like there's a movement in publishing for books to be shorter, which one might think is an economic model. But I also wonder how much of it is tied up to people's reading habits being different and people's, frankly, capacity for sustaining a long read. I mean, it does seem that reading online consistently... changes the way that one reads and changes the way that one is perhaps able to, to keep with someone making an argument over a period of time.

**Anne Helmreich**

Well, and there's been studies. I mean, there's scientific data to back up your observation. We are-, our brains are being changed. Our reading skills and reading capacities are being changed. What's the trickle down impact? Will we see dissertations get shorter? I'm not so sure about that. [Both laugh].

**Caro Fowler**

Well that wouldn't be a bad thing. Dissertations used to be, you know, kind of very neat, 80-page... well, I don't think that would be a bad thing if they became shorter for everyone involved. [Both continue laughing].

**Anne Helmreich**

Advisors would be quite happy. [Both continue laughing].

**Caro Fowler**

But it is interesting. One thing that interests me... in some ways I think art history as a discipline is born with the reproductive image. I mean, Vasari and his collection of prints and writing about prints - even though it was a small part for him, I think it was really actually important to his art historical project. And it seems that there's always been key moments in histories of reproduction, like the introduction of lithography or photography, that then really changed the ways that art history was written and thought about. And so it'll be interesting to see how screens and the mediation with the digital realm change how art history is practiced and written.

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, one product I'm looking forward to keeping my eye on is Pharos. It's a consortium of photo archives.

**Anne Helmreich**

You know, the Frick, Hertziana... I'm just naming a handful. The Getty is part of it. And they're moving to digitizing their photo archives and putting those online and then, you know, can those be married up with digital tools? So those photo archives, you know, they go back to the very founding of our discipline in the 19th century.

**Caro Fowler**

Oh, okay.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah.

**Anne Helmreich**

So what happens when we digitize those? When we make them 21st-century archives? So I think your questions will be great ones to bring to these. You know, the "what happens to the Warburg collection once it's digitized?" So I, yeah. I think there's, there's more to come.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, yeah. I mean, in some ways his Atlas project is very kind of pre-Google.  
[Both laugh]. Pre-Google image. So it'll be interesting to see how that works.

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, and there's wonderful, you know, people sort of using that in the digital humanities world to kind of reflect on that. So I'm thinking of Leo Impett's work that he did, you know, with the Stanford lab looking at some of Warburgs and thinking about gesture and rhetoric of image.

**Caro Fowler**

Oh that's interesting. That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much for talking to me today - [inaudible].

**Anne Helmreich**

Oh, Caro, thank you for your interest. And, you know, I hope that when this airs, maybe we can, you know, put some questions out on Twitter and see here [inaudible] about all those projects.

**Caro Fowler**

[Laughs].

**Anne Helmreich**

Right? You've raised some good ground about, like, what are examples of the local and digital art history? So, maybe we can find out about more projects underway.

**Caro Fowler**

Yeah, crowdsource more information.

**Anne Helmreich**

Yeah, exactly.

**Caro Fowler**

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