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Williamstown
Massachusetts 01267
413 458 2303
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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"PERCEPTION IS A FORM OF SAMPLING": CHRISTOPH COX ON MATERIALITIES OF SOUND

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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.

This episode is part of a miniseries on sound, in which Caitlin Woolsey, our postdoctoral fellow and also an expert in histories of sound media and 20th-century art, speaks with scholars and artists whose work explores the intersections of sound, media, and art history.

Caitlin Woolsey
I am Caitlin Woolsey. In this episode, I speak with Christoph Cox, professor of philosophy at Hampshire College, who writes on aesthetics, theories of sound, and cultural theory. In our conversation, Christoph describes his interdisciplinary academic path, and a current collaborative project on sampling.

Christoph Cox
To have a notion of justice means to have a notion of justice that's not entirely subject specific.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thank you so much for joining me today, Christoph. It's a real pleasure to have you on the podcast. And we usually open these conversations just by asking, really broadly, for you to reflect a little bit on how you might trace your intellectual formation, whether that's early experiences or exhibitions into graduate school.

Christoph Cox
So it's hard to know how far back to go, right? My mother was an art historian and worked on Northern Renaissance painting, primarily. And so I spent most of my childhood being, at that point, dragged to museums, and sort of developed in that, you know, these are the works I like, these are the works that interest me

and throughout, you know, throughout my sort of early life, I, I developed a connection with artworks. And when I went, when I came to Brown University as an undergraduate, it seems to me that the most exciting thing going on intellectually at Brown - and I mean there were lots of things - but, was the program that was once known as semiotics and came to be known as modern culture and media. And what I loved about that, is that there was a sort of deep connection to theory all over the, all over the spectrum, right? From, from film theory, cultural theory, feminist theory, connections to linguistics and anthropology, philosophy. And yet, there was always a connection to artworks. Primarily then to film, but also to painting, sculpture, design. And what I, what I liked about that program was that so many things could be incorporated in it. So it's essentially sort of doing, you know, cultural theory, artwork, and all of which could be, you know, could be a concentration. But I remember, I was-, my mother's German, and so I was traveling in Europe, and before I, before I went off to Europe, I was at a bookstore, grabbed a bunch of books that just sort of looked attractive, or a few books, and one of them was Dick Hebdige's "Subculture is the Meaning of Style," right? Which I think I was probably attracted to because it had this great sort of punk rock image on the cover. And that, you know, that was-, I was kind of a punk rock kid in high school. And so I found myself traveling through Europe, with just a small handful of books. And that book was probably deeper than I wanted to go [both laugh] as a, whatever it was, you know, junior in high school. But it introduced me to all these figures, right?

Caitlin Woolsey
Right. [Laughs].

Christoph Cox
It introduced me to figures like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. Then when I came to Brown, and, and saw these folks on a syllabus, that was super attractive to me and I wanted to do that. Yeah. So that, that opened up that kind of philosophical world, even though continental philosophy, as it's called, is not really in the mainstream in American, Anglo American philosophy departments.

So when I - I think a lot of, like a lot of people - when I went off to graduate school, I wasn't thinking so much, this is vocational training. I don't know -

Caitlin Woolsey
Mhm.

Christoph Cox
- I don't know, you know, I think a lot of us think that. But rather, this is a way to continue doing what I've, what I've been doing. And so I went to the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz, which has I think, close connections to Brown, close connections to the people at Brown. And there, too, I felt it was initially the same sort of thing. You know, I could do sort of science and technology studies with Donna Haraway, and film theory with Teresa De Lauretis, and study philosophy with David Hoy, and, and with Hayden White. And so all of that was just-, it's, it's funny, in a way I didn't, I didn't think so much. And I think, I think a lot of students don't think in terms of disciplines, we don't think in terms of I'm going to be this or that. We fall into particular fields and find that there are places that, you know, kind of accommodate us. So, there too. But of course, you know, graduate school does turn out to be vocational training [laughing]. And at some point, it was probably David Hoy, who said, you know, it's probably good to have actually a field, a discipline. And so, you know, philosophy was in a way natural for me because all the theoretical disciplines that interested me, could, perhaps be accommodated by philosophy. And yet, philosophy is also - in the country, in I think in the US in particular, but really all over - it's also a pretty narrow field.

Caitlin Woolsey
Mhm.

Christoph Cox
And so the various things that, you know, I considered philosophical, didn't necessarily, you know, weren't necessarily within the domain of academic philosophy. But, you know, so it's not to say that I wasn't able to follow things

that really interested me, able to follow... You know, Nietzsche was a deep interest of mine, since I was an undergraduate. A course with-, a fantastic course-, a series of courses with Martha Nussbaum really sort of engaged me in Nietzsche. And so I continued that. And I guess, I guess I'll say that, broadly speaking, my intellectual formation comes from poststructuralism, comes from that whole nexus of what used to be called theory, kind of capital T, in the 80s, in 70s, 80s, 90s. And from that, of course, you know, I, I fell into the broad history of philosophy. I probably, like a lot of people, you know, you, you start one place, and you realize, in order to do this, well, I have to... and then you sort of proceed back in the history of something.

Caitlin Woolsey
I know that the visual arts and sort of an art theory has emerged as a major piece of your scholarship and the way that you think, philosophically. And was that sort of present in a more concrete or tangible way, during your graduate studies?

Christoph Cox
I mean, I think in, early on, it was, it was particularly film, film and video. And always music, but never music and sound. But I think, I think like a lot of people I initially had a lot of trouble thinking abut sound theoretically. In part because the theoretical tools that had been, that I had been sort of brought into - and I'm thinking, you know, thinking, particularly of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis - those tools seemed to me to be more fully developed toward the visual.

And so while I was thinking a lot about film, I cared deeply sort of in a, in a personal way about about music and sound, but wasn't-, it took me a while to figure out how to actually bring those things together. When I came to Hampshire - and again, I think one of the things that I found most hospitable about Hampshire is that this is a place without departments, it's a place where one has an appointment, my appointment's in philosophy, but one can really range all over the place. You're not beholden to a particular discipline. So I started teaching this cours, and I think it was initially called "Philosophies of

Modern and Contemporary Art." And initially, I really was interested in focusing on philosophers, right? So that whole tradition - I mean, obviously, the deep tradition, you know, going back to Plato, but in the 20th century, you know, folks like Heidegger and Adorno and Merleau-Ponty and Derrida and Lyotard, Foucault and Kristeva and others. But I really kind of tried to make it philosophical, I was really thinking about that philosophical tradition. And the more I taught that course, I just thought there's no-, I mean, restricting this to philosophy seems artificial. And, and my students actually, I think, really loved it. They loved thinking philosophically about these. But one of the things that really bothered me is that so much of that philosophical tradition was really actually not thinking about artworks of its time. I mean, even you know, as much as one wants to, there are there are rare exceptions. I mean, people like Jacques Rancière, who actually seems to know a fair amount about, about, you know, about contemporary art. So if you think of, you know, even a philosopher like Heidegger, when when you think about who Heidegger was writing about, you know, he's writing about, he's writing about Hölderlin, he's writing about, you know, Van Gogh. I mean, these are not things-, this is not work produced in the 30s or the late 20s. Or even Derrida thinking about Van Gogh or Adami or someone like that, Foucault writing about Rene Magritte. These are not... you know, and so it frustrated me a little bit. I wanted people to be thinking about the art that's been made in the present. So I just, I kind of abandoned - I didn't abandon the philosophical frame, but it just seemed to me so much more important to include art theorists broadly, right?

So it doesn't matter to me that Fred Moten or David Getsy or someone like that, you know, or Rosalind Krauss, is not considered a philosopher. It's just, there was no requirement for me to make that [inaudible].

Caitlin Woolsey
Right.

Christoph Cox
So it developed that way. And I think that's, that's the way I think now and -

Caitlin Woolsey
Right. It just seems like there are these sort of arbitrary - like, one could draw these sort of arbitrary disciplinary tracks, and completely distinguish them and think about aesthetics or artwork purely through that strictly philosophical lineage versus the art historical or art theoretical lineage. But, why limit ourselves if you can bring the two together? Especially because so many of those art historians and the theorists that you reference are folks who are thinking about objects and visual culture and perception. People like Krauss and Moten, you know, are responding to, or are themselves influenced by that philosophical tradition.

Christoph Cox
Yeah, I mean, one of the things that fascinates me - and I haven't really dug deeply into this - but I have an interest in conceptual art and the history of conceptual art. And there was - especially with the Anglo American conceptualist - there was this real rigorous engagement with analytic philosophy with Anglo American philosophy folks, like, you know, obviously, Wittgenstein, A. J. Ayer, and I'm thinking Joseph Kosuth, and the art and language people, and all these people were really interested in that. And it seems really peculiar to me. I sort of wonder, from an art historical standpoint, where did those folks get those materials? How did they start to, you know, read that stuff? How were those things as opposed to what was going on in Europe at the time in the late 60s, say?

Caitlin Woolsey
So, I mean, I know that you have published on Nietzsche and on a lot of different topics within philosophy and the arts, but you also have written quite extensively on sound. And as you know, that's one of my personal investments in speaking with you. So I'd be curious, how did you end up finding your way or making your way in a scholarly kind of framework to sound or to experimental music, which I know is very much a part of what you address as well?

Christoph Cox

So I think, well, I was gonna say, like, a lot of people, music is a pretty deep part of my experience growing up. I played in bands since I was whatever, 13 through college. And I always kept really close attention to music and to music journalism, to music writing. Particularly, you know, magazine like "The Wire," British music magazine, that's a very intelligent sort of engagement with contemporary music, considered really broadly. So I had a teaching postdoc at the University of Chicago, and I was finishing the Nietzsche book and I - probably, I'm sure, this is probably familiar to everybody, right? When you're at the end of a project, it's a lot less interesting. And Chicago at the time - it still does - but it had a really amazing music scene that crossed between rock and dance music, house, techno, drum and bass and jazz, experimental jazz, free jazz. And that scene was really fascinating to me. And I wanted to write about it. I, you know, sent a pitch off to "The Wire" to write about some stuff and they said, sure, you know. And so I started just working as a music journalist, which was great. And it really trained me. I think, I've never been trained as an art historian. And yet, working as a music journalist is not like being an art historian. But one of the things it is, is it allows for a really intensive focus on a particular thing, right? And you have to say something articulate about it. So I really love that it's real kind of training to me. And in fact, I mean, I've considered the magazine work that I've done since then, to be kind of like, it's like fieldwork, you know what I mean? It's not maybe the thing that is my theoretical activity, professionally, but it's fieldwork. It's like, what's going on out there? And how can one describe it, think about it, analyze it. So anyway, I started doing that in the Chicago scene. And from experimental music, which had always been an interest to me, you know, sort of pushing closer and closer to the sort of boundaries between sound art and experimental music, and I started to think about that question that we mentioned a moment ago - just the kind of lack of a theoretical discourse about sound, about sonic art, broadly. I mean think there's a big music illogical discourse, right? Obviously, you know. But how to think about contemporary experimental music, and then specifically how to think about the ways in which sound is kind of growing within the field of contemporary art, art history. So this was in the late 90s, when that was really kind of, it seems to me that that was

that sense of sound and the sonic growing up, building in the art world, coming into art spaces beyond just music spaces. So I just wanted to kind of think conceptually about that. And to think what was going on and to try to figure out what kinds of resources could be drawn here. I think that drew a lot from, you know, really sophisticated and smart people who were writing about largely music at the time. I'm thinking of people like David Toop and Simon Reynolds, who were writing for "The Wire" at the time. Others, too, Rob Young, Anne Hilde Neset, there are these people. Anyway, and I wanted to sort of bring that to thinking about sonic art in a museum contex. And the deeper you start going into something, then you're plunging into that history. And then it's, it's all really, it's all really engaging. And I might be wrong about this, but not a lot of people were doing it at the time. And so it felt kind of like, it just felt really felt engaging. And it felt like I was exploring something that hadn't been fully explored.

Caitlin Woolsey
I'm just curious if you saw those two, those two kind of through lines of your more theoretical writing about sound and the kind of the more curatorial practice as being sort of in lockstep, or one sort of lead into the other and in productive ways?

Christoph Cox
Yeah, I can come back to the curatorial in just a second. But just thinking about music writing, that's something that I think is really engaging. I know that obviously, art historians think about this all the time, but just what's an adequate language for this object, for this thing that you're thinking of. And some of my favorite exercises with students - obviously, a lot of my courses, the things I teach are theoretical - but just getting students to just develop a descriptive language about something, right? Just describe this thing. And, and I'm often kind of obnoxious about it. It's is like, well, no, no, you're not describing the thing now, you're describing what the thing reminds you of of whatever. Try to describe the thing, the thing in front of you. And that's, um, that's a great practice. And I just, I really enjoy it. I enjoy doing it myself. And so early on, when I was doing a lot more music journalism, that was really something that I, I tried

to keep a focus on. Forgetting about the theoretical stuff, just like what's in front of you, what are you are hearing? What are you seeing? And anyway, I think it's a fun thing to do. And as we all know, it's always translation, right?

Caitlin Woolsey
Right.

Christoph Cox
It's always a version of like, you know -, and something that always bugged me is when students would say, oh, you can't describe music. But somehow you can describe a chair, or a lamp, or a painting, you know what I mean? Why is that a different kind of object? And there are all these sort of presuppositions about music that I was interested in dispelling. Again, it's a different kind of object, but it's not a completely bizarre and unique object. Object is probably the wrong word. But yeah, to curating - I mean, all the curatorial stuff I've ever done - I mean it's not immense - has been through invitation. It's always been through invitation and mostly through - not through my theoretical writing, actually - it's mostly through my journalistic or other writing.

Caitlin Woolsey
And it's always been focused on sound, or sound art? Or is that... [inaudible].

Christoph Cox
Yes, for the most part. So the first invitation I got, it was just after an "Artforum" piece I wrote, just a short form piece. And I was invited by a commercial gallery in Washington, DC, G Fine Art Gallery, to curate a show on the notion of loops, loops and looping. And I just thought that was a cool provocation. It was a cool, cool task assignment. And there were drawings, installations, video, sound, but it was more photographs. While the loop idea in a way came from sound for this invitation, most of the work in the show wasn't sonic or didn't have a particular relationship to sonic. I mean, it's just a broader conceptual issue that always has interested me in terms of-, I mean, the show was kind of organized around circles and lines, right? Like the ways in which the loop is something that recurs.

But it's also, you know, I'm thinking about, calendars. How a calendar is a kind of loop and how a series is a kind of loop. Anyway...

Caitlin Woolsey
Switching gears a little bit, I'm interested to hear you speak a little bit about your experience at a school like Hampshire, that, as you mentioned, doesn't have traditional departments, and there are sort of appointments in a particular area, like philosophy in your case. But especially coming out of an undergraduate program and a graduate program that were also exceedingly interdisciplinary, I would just be curious to hear you speak a little bit about what your sense is of that kind of interdisciplinary way of thinking, or sort of within the university system today.

Christoph Cox
Yeah, so I mentioned that both my undergrad and graduate training were very interdisciplinary. One was never kind of required to declare a particular discipline, a particular methodology. And then at Hampshire, that's really the case as well. So in a way, it's natural, in a sense, to me. I want to answer your broader question, but let me just-, I want to say that I am actually really committed to philosophy as a discipline, as a methodology, and as a history of texts and concerns. And one of the things that I think is really fascinating, is... well, so for a long time, there was a discourse of interdisciplinarity in the academy. And often interdisciplinarity was quite shallow. It was just like, well, you slightly crossover between this and that, and it's called interdisciplinary. And that's, you know, I mean, that's fine. It's not objectionable, but it's a little bit shallow. And so, and then everything became interdisciplinary. That just meant like, there's a philosopher, and then there's, I don't know, a physicist or something. But one of the things I find really fascinating is, I think what's made the discipline of philosophy - and I think this is true in other fields as well- what's made the discipline of philosophy, what's broadened it out beyond it's quite narrow confines, is actually the confrontation with non-European thought, right? This idea, you know, I think, philosophy departments today are saying, well, we have to attract a broad range of students. Our students are more and more

international, you know, social justice and other concerns make us think like, we can't just be teaching a bunch of old white guys. But so as soon as you broaden that out, then you're thinking like, well, does this have to be philosophy per se, capital P? Or can it be broadened out? And then you've loosened the bounds between your disciplines. And I love that. I think that's really great.

Caitlin Woolsey
And I certainly appreciate your point about the depth and the rigor of true interdisciplinary work. So much of the way that that we need to be moving today as scholars and as faculty, and as people curating as well, is to think in this more expansive way about these different kind of circuits of exchange. But that, institutionally, sometimes, that there's a resistance to that?

Christoph Cox
Yeah, no, exactly. Yeah, and real interdisciplinary work - or, as you know, at Hampshire, we sort of seem to be moving toward the term transdisciplinary. I don't know if it's better, but at least it suggests a kind of cross. They're just really important, rich things. Just to give you an example, something that I've been thinking a lot about lately - and it's a project that I'm that I'm working on with a couple colleagues at Hampshire - is just the notion of sampling kind of across disciplines, the notion of a sample. And this is, you know, obviously there's musical sampling. But I think about what a scientist does when she samples a particular like, you know takes a water sample or something like that. Or what a photographer does, it's a kind of a sample, it's a visual sample. And in a way, it's cool to explore these relationships among them. But for me, there's a really, actually profound-, there's some profound philosophical issues involved. These kind of questions between part and whole, which, you know, I mean, I guess it'd be like, synecdoche or something in the literary domain, but philosophers call it mereology relationships between parts and wholes. And the question, how is it that we're always getting only partial samples of the world - and perception is a form of sampling - so, how can we claim to have any kind of adequate understanding or grasp of the world? And this is a super old problem. And it's a problem that I think a lot of people just thought they've solved. Like, the answer

is no, there's no truth, there's no whatever. But I'm not satisfied with that idea, right? Like, you know, I don't think that climate change is just a perspective on the world. I think it's actually a true thing [laughing]. And so anyway, this is a broad question, but this has caused me to sort of rethink some of my kind of poststructuralist training. And to think a little bit more about questions of truth and reality, the true, the real. And I think political issues come into play here, too. I think, over the last four years, but beyond that, too, truth is a really political issue. Truth and reality are political issues, right [laughing]? This is an auto critique, right? Because I'm fundamentally a kind of Nietzschian, and in perspectivism is part of who I am and what I do. And yet, I think it's really important to challenge that, you know? Climate change isn't just a perspective on the world.

Caitlin Woolsey
Right.

Christoph Cox
Fake news or whatever, isn't just a perspective on the world. There are things that are true. Anyway. So this sampling thing is really an effort to try to get at, how can - given that we all we ever have our parts - how can we have a relationship to a whole? What is a whole? And that requires, to my mind, a really interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary kind of inquiry. Because I need to know what my colleagues were scientists, how they think about that, and how photographers think about that, and philosophers and, you know...

Caitlin Woolsey
I mean, do you see this project as relating to some of your writing about sonic materialism or sort of this idea of the kind of perennial flow of a sonic matter, as you discuss in your book, "Sonic Flux," which came out in 2018? Or do you see those as being sort of-, that question of the being and the flow is as a separate matter?

Christoph Cox

Yeah, I think so. That effort isn't-, that book kind of - I mean, obviously, it comes out of all the previous work that I've done, it has, you know, there are traces of-, you know, Nietzsche plays a fairly big role in that, so does Derrida and others. But that book was really part of a shift in my thinking toward thinking in terms of the true, the real, and fundamentally, you know, I'm a materialist. That is, I think that the world is fundamentally matter, or I guess, if you want to get more complicated, it's matter energy, or patterned matter energy, right? And, initially that book, that project on sound and music, sort of materiality of sound and music, was an effort to combat some of the common ideas about music - oh, music is ineffable, or music or sound is ineffable. And all of that just comes from a peculiar prejudice. Really what we mean is that it's not visible. But anybody, it like, you know-, I mean, not to be too sort of flat footed about it, but I mean, when we hear sounds, there's literally, like stuff is pushing against the membrane of our hearing apparatus. So that project was an effort to think about sound as a particular kind of flow, as a particular flow that's akin to other kinds of material flows. Flows of biomass and genes, and flows of information and flows of, you know, geological flows, flows of lava, and whatever. All the kinds of things that I think Manuel DeLanda talks about so well in the book "A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History." And so to think about sound as a kind of perennial flow from which musicians, or we all the time, we kind of sample, right? We pull a particular part of that down and we foreground it for aesthetic or other kind of engagement.

Caitlin Woolsey

I know that there have been some critiques within the sound studies - you know, maybe in quotes, whatever - but sounds studies realm about this kind of turn towards not just on your part, but other scholars, this kind of turn towards sonic materialism or a kind of ontology of sound as potentially falling into a trap of a kind of implicit assumption of neutrality or that there's a kind of not taking into account the subject position in a complex enough manner. And I'm just curious what your thinking is?

Christoph Cox

Yeah, that's a good question. And it's a really interesting debate within-, it's a debate within sound studies that I think is a part of a really a broader aesthetic and political debate. And so, I mean, just briefly, I think that the claim goes like this. So you know, folks who are sort of pushing an ontological realists line, like I am - they want to claim that sound is a thing, that sound and music is a thing independent of the ways in which it's appropriated by particular cultures - by culture, generally - but by particular cultures and particular human beings with particular subject positions. And, I mean, that's obviously, that's a critique that's kind of dear to me, in a way, because it's all of my intellectual formation was about foregrounding exactly that. That's, that's what I think. And I think that critique comes out of a really set of valuable-, I think of it as poststructuralist, but I'm sure that one could come-, you know, other theoretical domains could be brought into that discussion. But I think that's, again, where that kind of question of the sampling project I mentioned a moment ago comes into play, because it seems to me that we have to be able to hold both positions at once. We have to hold the positions, there are only situated knowledges, there are only samples, there's only a particular kind of access to the world. And yet despite that, we have some access to the way the world is. And I just think, I think that climate change in particular, but there are other, you know, I think it's also true, to have a notion of justice means to have a notion of justice that's not entirely subject specific. I mean, in other words, justice requires... And so anyway, what's so important to me about that is that critique is really valuable. But so is I'm pushing the opposite line, not, because I don't think that the critique is valuable, but because I think that these two things have to be-, these two positions have to be thought of together.

Caitlin Woolsey
Right.

Christoph Cox
And so, you know, one of the critiques of sonic materialism or one of the critiques of the ontological realist line is that it ignores culture, and I don't think that's true at all. In fact, if we think about sound, for example, as a perennial

flow, well, that's too vague, right? The sound actually comes to us, in particular cultural context. And from particular sub-contexts within that, that are raced that are gendered. But those two things are not at odds with one another. In other words, I think they operate at a different kind of scale. And really, I guess that the sampling project, or the part/whole project that I'm thinking of, is really a question of how do we negotiate in scale. This is a drive about this particular thing for a moment, but I'm really-, there's a great little piece by Stephen Jay Gould, an evolutionary theorist, about scale with regard to thinking ecologically. And he's commenting on this person that says, you know, in the grand scheme of things, humans are these little piddly things that we really actually shouldn't care about, and species and whatever, they come and go. Well, that's true, but like, I think we should also care about human beings and, you know, and panda bears and chipmunks and whatever, too [both laughing]. And yet still, we like negotiating between those scales, and so all the questions of deep time and historical time. These are things I think we need to think together, and I feel a little bit-, on the one hand, I'm happy to have been part of maybe opening up the relationship between these two. But what I don't want and what I'm trying to sort of not pursue is the idea that these two positions are antithetical. They need to be brought together. Yeah. I mean, I think that a Marxist or Hegelian would think about this dialectically, right? So much of the value of structuralist theory, psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, critical race studies has been to say, hey, we have to stop thinking in terms of truth in reality as though they're these obvious singular things, and we have to route these back in the experiences of particular people. And we have to question what nature is, what truth is, you know, all these, all these things that may be-, had been taken for granted in a more sort of naive vision of the world. It seems to me that that needs to shift back. Not naively to think, again, that truth, and reality, and nature and whatever these sort of obvious things, to bring with us all the lens of particularity that came from those critiques. But I worry that when you when you push those critiques far enough - and I know this sounds like, there's a sort of really problematic version of this this critique - but if you push that kind of perspectivism, far enough, I think you get where we mentioned a moment ago. You lose any purchase on a notion like justice. Because, you know, hey,

Kellyanne Conway has her alternative facts, and you've got yours. And you know, the Proud Boys have their facts and Black Lives Matter have theirs, and you just want to say that's not, you know….

That can't be right. That can't be right. Yeah. So anyway, that's part of this project. I'm doing this in a super modest way. You know, thinking sonically, thinking about photographs and whatever. But I think it's part of a - to me really - engaging and exciting set of philosophical problems that we're wrestling with in the early 21st century.

Caitlin Woolsey
Would you want to say more specifically about the photography piece of that project, or?

Christoph Cox
So, beyond sound, I've always been interested in photography, film, experimental film, video. And some of these are just a matter of pulling together some of the things I've written into a particular form, into the form, hopefully, of a book. But I'm also just trying to think broadly about photography. And there are obviously particular photographers that interest me, and that I'm writing about and want to write about. But really, I'm partly thinking-, the project really started about thinking about photography and phonography. And one of the interesting things I think that's happened in sound-, sonic art over the past 20 years - I mean, the history is much larger - is a real renewal of interest in phonography or in field recording. And so many really interesting artists, you know, Jana Winderen a Norwegian artist, Emeka Ogboh a Nigerian artist, Jacob Kierkegaard, Danish artist, all these people who are really working in the context of field recording. And the question-, the kind of banal question is like, what is a field recording? Like, what is it? Were capturing a part of the world, what's its status? Is it like, are we supposed to hear, oh, great, now I hear the Arctic or something. Is it supposed to be documentary? Is supposed to be artistic? And of course, photography has been dealing with this since the early 19th century, and so I'm interested in thinking about the history of photography, and then thinking

about phonography, and how we can sort out what phonographers, what field recordists are doing in the early 21st century. But that leads, as I said, to these broader questions about relationships of parts and wholes, and grasping a part of the world and having it represent something or present something. And though I think it's, you know, terribly obscure and kind of maddening, someone like François Laruelle writing on non-photography, and thinking of the photograph not as a representation of the world but as a part of the world. And that's really engaging to me and trying to think sound in relationship to that. So they're broader philosophical concerns, but they're also narrow concerns having to do with photography and sound. Yeah.

Caitlin Woolsey
In relation to that question of part and whole, are you thinking about - both at that kind of sound level and also, at the level of photography - are you thinking about the concrete recording, whether that's the photographic print or the mixtape? And then in relation to digital forms or digitization?

Christoph Cox
No, it's all of that, right? Like, it's all of that. And again, the history in this in photography... I mean, the history in phonography is long, too, but photography has a has a much-, it was theorized much more fully in photography, the relationship between... Okay, yes. The photographic apparatus registers a part of the world in a kind of indexical way, fine. But then we all know that it registers in in a particular way, and the way that the machine takes it in and the way that it's developed and processed, and that's made much more complicated in the digital domain. So, too, is sound. But so many field recordists, what's important, what's interesting to them is that this comes from the world, right? It comes, you know, in some way. And yet, I'm doing something with it. But the index, or I should say the source, is still important for that work. It's not generated solely on a laptop or something. So anyway, I'm interested in what is that relationship to the world. And it's not exactly a relationship of representation. It's something else. So it's beyond a kind of representation. So that's fascinating to me, aesthetically. And

then I think there are also broader political and ontological questions that that emerged from that.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thanks so much. It's been a real pleasure talking to you.

Christoph Cox
Likewise, it's real pleasure for me too.

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