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

**“AN ART HISTORY YET TO COME”:
KIRSTEN SCHEID ON PALESTINIAN ART**

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Transcript

Caro Fowler

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

In this episode of *In the Foreground*, I talk with Kirsten Scheid, associate professor of anthropology at the American University of Beirut, and the Clark/Oakley Humanities Fellow in the academic year of 2019/2020. During her year at the Clark, Kirsten was working on the history of artistic practice in modern Palestine. In our conversation, we discuss issues of access and ethics around archives, and consider imagination as an ethical practice.

Kirsten Scheid

When we want to talk about power, we want to talk about hegemony, we want to talk about hierarchy and structure, we rarely look at art—but on the other hand, we need to. In order to understand power and hierarchy and structure we need to understand people's self-expressions. We need to understand what mobilizes them, what motivates them, what brings them together, what affects them. So wouldn't art really be a way to understand those things?

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for joining us today Kirsten. And one thing that comes out in all of your interviews that I've read that you have taken part in, and that I know, [and what] you've told me about and your own story and biography is that when you experienced being in New York City in the early 90s, and following our entering into a war with Iraq, you were not only incensed, but also politically active. And I think in one interview you even say that it was at one of these marches or events that you met artists who were from Palestine, and that this struck you--that you were surprised by this because despite attending Columbia

University, despite taking courses in art history and anthropology, you'd been introduced to a construct in which it seemed inconceivable that there could be living artists working in Palestine. And this struck you so much that you moved to the West Bank, is this correct?

Kirsten Scheid

Yeah, it is. First, thanks for having this discussion with me. It's a really great opportunity to think about these things and try to tie them together at a very important time for all of us. So yes, I met Palestinian artists, and I was exiting the school at that time anyway. And so I thought I should go learn about art from them because they were doing something that, exactly as you put it, the construct I had been introduced to made inconceivable. I was very much aware of the kind of connoisseurial focus of art history at Columbia at that time. It may have been a particular period in the late 80s, early 90s of that program, but definitely the kind of TK idea that art can only be entertained during times of great luxury. This went along with this notion that it's only great civilizations--it's only places that have extreme division of labor that can host art, and that art is always about the opposite of daily life needs. And so how could a people under occupation for whom everything in their daily life is about just meeting and just surviving--that was my understanding of their life from my little place in New York--how could they be wasting their time on art? Or was art really a part of life in a way that I hadn't been able to learn about? And I didn't have any job lined up for myself or any obligations financially at that point. I had helped to pay for my college tuition, but I didn't carry the debt for it that my parents took on. And so I waitressed for a while, saved up a little pocket money, and went to the West Bank, enrolled in Birzeit University for some Arabic language classes, and got a job with an art center there being a research assistant because my American passport allowed me to travel around the West Bank and help them get information. And on the side, I interviewed as many artists as I could, which was a lot. A lot of people were active there.

Caro Fowler

So this fieldwork began in 1992. And it's going on until the present still. You came to the Clark to work on this book project that is, I think in many ways, a drawing together of all this work you've done between 1992 and 2018. And over this period, I know you've developed an archive of both artists' work within Palestine, and then also Lebanon as well where you've been teaching at the American University in Beirut. And I'm sure that these two archives overlap, but I imagine that they also diverge as well in certain places. And your archive is so extant that it's even appeared in Walid Raad's work as "Dr. Kirsten Scheid's Fabulous Archive."

Kirsten Scheid

I had been made into a fantasy person apparently but yeah [both laugh].

Caro Fowler

So first, I would like to know what is actually within these archives? It must be these early interviews, but then what else? Is it actual works? Is it photographs? What is the actual material that is contained within these archives you've built over 16 years?

Kirsten Scheid

I want to start by saying that actually there's pathetically little overlap between the two components of my archive. So they both have the fault of being very nation-bound. And it's because they're both really artifacts of my own working process, which was emerging at the time. But each of my research projects have been--and I think of this as quite a fault--limited to the questions around and the actual apparatuses of the two different nation-states. And I think that is a huge drawback in a lot of art study done outside of the West, in part because of the checkpoints, the boundaries around these places that make it difficult, and in part because of the languages that many people who are studying these from an art historical perspective now don't know. So if you know Arabic, you probably don't know Persian or Turkish. And those historically are languages that did flow across, and weren't bound to place like they are now. So our practices are not reflecting properly creative production. But so when I was collecting the material

in Palestine, the artists just like handed me stuff and said, "read this," and my archives were what they told me to use to learn from them primarily. So you had press dossiers, you had manifestos, exhibition catalogs, also images of their work--never any actual artwork. And actually, none of my archives are original material. They're always copies of people's work. Particularly in Palestine, because I was a young Arabic speaker just learning, I would show this material--I think this is quite fortuitous—but I had to show it to people and ask them how to understand it. So after the artists had given it to me and talked to me about it, and I had field notes on that, then I would show it to other people, and they would tell me how they understood it--even little kids. I would show it to collectors. I would show pictures to collectors. I would show things to anyone I could meet. I was constantly asking people, what should I see in this? Or how do I make sense of this word? And so the Palestine archive has these layers on layers on layers of people's interactions with the artworks and the things around them. And I think that does make it quite unique. There are also interviews with artists who are no longer active, and who aren't even remembered by people who are active as artists now as having been active. And on the other hand, the Lebanon material—when I got to Lebanon in 1993, it was a space with many more active art events and people. There was a university. There were lots of galleries. And I reproduced to an extent my earlier method, but by now I was much better in Arabic, and I was interviewing artists. They again gave me these press dossiers. I was working in two of the most important galleries in the city, and volunteering to help putting together exhibitions, doing the press list, and all that. And in those places what really struck me, especially because I'd come from Palestine, which had so many barriers to art making and circulation, to this place that seems so much nicer, was how much people said to me, "There's no art here. We actually don't have art here." There were artists who told me that: "Why have you come to interview me? You should be in New York." There are gallerists like, "Okay yeah, there are a couple artists, but they're an exception." And collectors like, "No, there's not really art here."

And so that sense of objection so overwhelmed me that I needed to deal with it. I needed to put it in a historical perspective. And I took up the press dossiers that

people had given me, [and] artists would only usually keep the favorable commentaries on their exhibitions. So I go back to the newspapers from the same dates, and look for other reviews. And then I use those to find mentions of others. And eventually I started reading newspapers from the 60s day by day. And then I went back to the 50s because I kept finding this same objection, the same discourse that there's no art here. And I was like, "Well, when did this start? Because there's been art here all along." I went back in, and I landed in the 20s and 30s eventually. And reading these newspapers day by day added around the art events: the advertisements, the debates about politics going on, other things being discussed. And so that really fleshed out a life around art that hadn't been available otherwise. It was always art used as a marker for the absence of other things, or the absence of art used to call into question the validity of the Lebanese way of life for the state.

To speed ahead to Walid—and other artists have worked with the material. There's also a Mirna Bamieh, who's a Palestinian artist. In 2008, he interviewed me because he had been told by people that "Oh, she's got a lot of stuff on Lebanese art, if you want to know the history of this stuff," and he took his flatbed scanner into my office. I wasn't even there. And he just scanned everything in all of the office, all the cabinets. And what he made out of that as art to me is probably the best expression of what's there, which is to say, the artworks that he produced are mostly white with tiny pinpricks of color. There are these tantalizingly intimate little scribbles. There are silhouettes of things that are actually the columns of the newspapers where I'd cut out the list of all the shows being announced. And he shrunk them down, and he put so much weight around them. Chromatically white is the combination of all the light rays being refracted back. It struck me that this whiteness around these tiny pinpricks was this amazing insistence on all the effort that had gone into the creation of a possibility for Lebanese art. So all the archives that I had collected had been saved. I had just gotten them from other people or from newspapers—sources trying to make sure there was something called Lebanese art. And we know so little about it still. The tiny pinpricks of color of the silhouette suggests there's something there, but the overwhelming stuff has not yet been filtered, has not

yet been particularized into these little categories. And I think that's what's so exciting about the archive. It's a reference to things that can still be known if we are very careful about how we select the light rays that we follow out of it, if we pay attention to what we filter. Because otherwise, my huge fear, and this is one of the reasons why it hasn't really become publicly available yet is that it has to get digitalized and turned it into categories that people could search for. So you have to know in advance what you want to find. And I wouldn't want the archive to operate that way. I had read from Deleuze in an anthropology volume about the idea of becoming. Deleuze has this quote saying that every artwork hails of people yet to become. And I wonder if archives can be better thought of that way as always hailing an art history or a set of researchers who have not yet become.

Caro Fowler

I think that's a beautiful way to think about it. And I think definitely the archive is something that orients itself towards the future. And I think you're right that however you choose to ultimately organize it, or keyword permit or file it even, it will be oriented towards the future users and some sense that you have for yourself about how they should think about accessing the material that's within there.

Kirsten Scheid

So much of what we learn is by going into either a library or an archive, and seeing how things have been brought together. And you go and look for one library, and look at one book, and then you see five others on the shelf—where you're looking through a volume of correspondence between administrators and the 1920s, and you find strange letters. This opens up new things. But if you never have that ability to be absorbed within this set of traces, these living things, then you don't get acted on that way.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. You wouldn't know that such a thing could exist--that there could be something out there that you would have a set of skills that you could access.

Just the term archive or the idea that one should be able to access an archive is a privileged position, no?

Kirsten Scheid

Right.

Caro Fowler

And another key term in your project is imagination right? I think I already asked you about it when you presented at the Clark. It's one that whenever I read your work, I would say it's a recurrent term. My sense is that for you imagination is necessary. And I mentioned Appadurai. I thought his writing on imagination might have impacted your own thinking about it in terms of what he thinks of or calls it a site by which one can express their own agency in a system that is otherwise trying to take that agency away or negate it, or refute its existence. So I wonder if imagination is necessarily always positive, or if imagination is also something that can be manipulated or abused as a means to refuse to acknowledge or deal with things that must be dealt with in order to move forward?

Kirsten Scheid

Yeah, I do absolutely see this ongoing conversation between these two sides of imagination. For Palestinians, they're quite aware that many Israelis talk about Israel the state as a work of art--as a result of the perseverance of imagination. In thinking about how we can converge on and share ideas that may be convenient to some, but fly in the face of obligations that we have to the world, to each other, I'm also thinking about imagination there. And I'm trying to think about how we allow our imagination to be hijacked or reduced. And so I think TK said it, we can imagine so many things, and yet we imagined so little. I guess what really strikes me is that when we want to talk about power, we want to talk about hegemony, [and] we want to talk about hierarchy and structure, we rarely look at art--but on the other hand, we need to. In order to understand power and hierarchy and structure, we need to understand people's self-expressions. We need to understand what mobilizes them, what motivates them, what brings

them together, what affects them. So wouldn't art really be a way to understand those things? And TK views it as if it's self-evident, and he talks about the locality--the quality of the local and how that comes about. But my thinking about imagination in particular has been much more indebted to Amira Mittermaier's work. And she's an anthropologist who works on dreaming in Egypt, who has explored Arabic ideas of the imagination. And so her discussion of this notion of al-khayal, which translates as imagination or fantasy, actually resonates a lot with the newspaper language of art reviews that I was reading from the 1920s and 30s and 40s—so the time when people were rethinking a lot of Islamic terms in the wake of the fall of the Sultanate. Al-khayal is not the opposite of reality. Al-khayal is an in-between state. We talk about liminality in anthropology: this place where people are not opposed to the world. They're in direct relation to it, but the normal rules for interaction are suspended. So you can see the thing you're dreaming that you can't physically see. And you can meet people. And you can move forward and backward in time in ways that we don't allow ourselves to when we're awake, and experience obligations and debts that might actually enrich or explain to you who you are. And so it's that new state or that al-khayal that I'm really interested in as a place--Mittermaier talks about as a critical space. You're questioning the things that you otherwise feel you have to take for granted. And by questioning them, you're activating that imaginative capacity such that you have responsibility for the ways that you are either not actively imagining or letting your imagination be hijacked, or you're imagining daily life into being. I'm really interested in how the imaginary is really part of the ordinary.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, well what it also sounds like from what you're saying, it's a practice, right? It's an ethical practice. It's one in which you choose to engage in order to act in the world with greater purpose and sense of oneself. So it must be, I imagine, that form of imagination that guided you and your co-curator when you did the Jerusalem show—thinking through this idea of liminality, and suspending the Euclidean rules of space and time, so that we can open up new spaces within Jerusalem. Because my sense of the Jerusalem show is that it's not that it was an

installation, so much as it was a series of sites throughout Jerusalem by which to produce interactions between people and works, and to think about the ways in which these are all constantly in flux. And so I would love to hear more about both what that statement means within your literature on the show—as someone who collects exhibition materials from the 20th century, you must be so acutely aware of the own materials you produce in your curatorial practice—but also how you and your co-curator approached that exhibition, and the ways in which you thought about both the physical space of Jerusalem and the imaginary space.

Kirsten Scheid

To me, it came out of both al-khayal, and Amira Mittermaier's talking about dreaming and the term in Arabic for this in-between state. We co-curated the ninth edition, so there had been eight editions going back to 2007. All of them were part of a project to make contemporary art part of the life of the Old City of Jerusalem--this place that seems to be ancient, that symbolizes connection to the past for three major religions and for so many pilgrims, and this place that seems to be all about religion and politics, [and] not about art, not about contemporary art at all. Jack had been involved since the 90s since I met him first in '92 and '91. Two dozen or three dozen artists would be invited--mostly people from abroad who didn't know about Palestine maybe or who were interested in it but hadn't been; some of them would also be Palestinians living in diaspora, but also South African or German or Indonesian [or] Australian artists, and also artists from the West Bank and from inside as well too. [They] would be invited to make installations in various private places in the Old City (so either shops or religious establishments) that have Jerusalem as the background. The installations come from the artists maybe having a two week residency there, but they're about the artists experience or his thinking or her thinking about the Old City. And so these were all spread out. You'd have 25 sites. And it became a very unwieldy venture for a small independent art space to man, to staff, and to maintain over three weeks. And so on opening night, you'd get a lot of people, many even flying in from abroad to attend the event. And over subsequent days, if there was an art event maybe you'd get more people again, but usually they

were not very well attended. And for the local residents—I mean, there are people who live in the Old City; it is one of the most densely populated places in the world—there wasn't much to draw them into these private spaces, because there wasn't much outreach being done. Sometimes there was, but it had to be constantly sustained. And you would have to be willing to teach people a new way of using their perceptual skills—a new set of languages that we spent a lot of time learning if you're going to art schools or to art history.

And so it just didn't seem like it was going to be doable because we only had three months, and I had to prepare the show. And it didn't seem advisable to continue to do because it actually seemed to create more of the polarization between the arts and the local community: the artists being upset that people weren't really seeing their show, and people being upset that artists were showing them that sometimes. And so we were thinking that all of that is coming about by taking Jerusalem for granted, by making Jerusalem the backdrop to art production [and] treating it as something we already know. It's a walled city, but its walls have actually moved. They were somewhere else at the time of Jesus. And then when the 12th century when—I forget who it is now. I should read up on it again. And that complexity was why we're thinking [inaudible]. Euclidean space time is the source of Palestinian fragmentation because things have been going along with this map that keeps getting more and more fractured, and of Israeli oppression, and of this constant deferment of a wholeness because we're not actually working with the lives that we're living. We're not looking at it. And we were thinking about how our imagination was part of that. All to say that we—Jack had already articulated this: he wanted the art to be the way of knowing the city, rather than the city the backdrop to the art. The city would be the subject of the art.

Caro Fowler

One of the most incisive articles you've written for me, for my own understanding of your work, is a review that you wrote of MoMA's inclusion of artists who were banned by President Trump from entering the country in 2017. And one of the things that was so striking to me that you pointed out was that

until we had the ban, we didn't get to see these works, [and] that you ask the question, "What is inclusion when the space has been created through exclusion?" That was such a powerful point to me. And in the little reading I'd done on MoMA's installation of these artists' works, I hadn't really come across a critique. Primarily MoMA had been celebrated in its choice to make an installation that commented on our current political state in a way that I think, for the individuals involved felt only affirmative. And yet it does seem that MoMA has taken to heart some of those criticisms in their recent reinstallation. And I remember when we discussed this article and a newer version of this article when we were at the Oakley Center, people asked you what you thought of the new MoMA reinstallation, and you hadn't had a chance to see it yet. And I'm curious if you've had a chance to see the reinstallation, and what your thoughts are in terms of the critique that you raised in this review, and the ways in which you feel that the institution itself has addressed the problem of institutional racism, and a continuing kind of continuity and culpability within most predominantly white institutions, if not all, or if you still feel that MoMA has a ways to go?

Kirsten Scheid

Yeah, I found it still centralizing. What I was really thinking about in the review was how institutions--MoMA's not the only one--that had been taking for granted their centrality as institutions for creating our understanding of art had been threatened. They've had to respond to institutions declaring themselves in other places and saying, "Well, we're going to do art differently now." And so I've been looking at the techniques by which things get made to be a center—again, seeing things as a process, not as givens, always through relations. And you can walk through the new MoMA and unpack the icons, and you can start to tell other stories, but you are going to have to put in a lot of effort for that. They're there. There are some trigger—triggers is probably not the right word—but if you've put in your labor, you can but you don't have to. You don't have to stop. I think the most powerful stopping or near stopping point is Faith Ringgold's piece being right next to Picasso's. And that's one thing that happens, but if you look at the commentaries that were registered online around that, you can see this

centralizing that people do to insist on note that Ringgold's work is only to make her work as valuable as Picasso's.

So any museum that respects itself as an institution has to think that there are going to be audience members coming in who will be doing that, who will be doing things as audience members that they've been prepped to do all their lives, and that it's not going to just change. Things aren't going to just change because they juxtapose something differently. And I think that more would have to be put in by MoMA to actually counter that. I felt that there's actually a promise [that] the way the MoMA is still laid out, that it won't budge the art that's really valuable, that the art that's really the center is not going to go anywhere, which was also what the curators had said explicitly in the aftermath of that rehang in January 2017. They said, "Don't worry, your favorites aren't going to go anywhere. You will not be threatened," in response to museums themselves being threatened as institutions that generate knowledge and income and get footfall.

And it just so happens that the Grey Gallery at NYU, at the same time that MoMA was reopening and inviting people to come in and see its new hang, its new installation, was hosting a show called "Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from the Abby Grey Collection." And I went to that in the afternoon, and it was much smaller, but it was actually very dense. And I felt like this is a space that really did a lot more work to make people think about how art came about here because it's focused around Abby Grey's collecting practices. The artworks were discussed. There would be multiple labels around single pieces even. One would be about the artist and the artist's training, and how the artist had moved between different places, and which interlocutors the artist had trained with in Minnesota or in other places. And there would be a label discussing the composition of the artwork. And then there'd be a label about Abby Grey. What were her letters like at that time? And what was she looking for? What were her obsessions and her fantasies? Why did she need to see this stuff? Making the collector vulnerable to the artwork, and showing the work as something that's become available through specific selection processes-

it's not like it's the victim of that. It's been acting on the curator too. I found that fore-fronting of this collecting effort [as] a way to get beyond what MoMA is still doing, which is objects that evince brilliance, objects in themselves, that erases, literally whitens everything around, which is not to erase, but which is to fill in with the dominant expectation.

Caro Fowler

When I was thinking about how to talk to you--because one of the things I'm interested in these interviews is talking to people about how they see changes within their own discipline and possible future subjects within the discipline--one thing that I found so difficult is how to even describe your discipline, and beyond the fact that you work in anthropology and art history, and that you work between these two disciplines. How do we think about contemporary Middle Eastern art? But obviously, the term Middle Eastern art is incredibly fraught, and assumes that one is sitting within North America or Europe to even use that term. How would you like to see the best practices for continuing to work in the field of contemporary art that is produced within these geographic areas? Do you think that the term "Islamic art" will even be in use in 50 years? What for you as someone who's been in this field, and seen so many changes--and also I think your position from both anthropology and art history gives you a really interesting perspective. I think anthropology allows you an awareness of shortcomings and ethnographic identifications that might not always be obvious to art historians. So for you, what are the best practices for continuing to work in the field going forward? And what do you suggest for graduate students coming up in art history?

Kirsten Scheid

Learn the language of the place, and spend a lot of time with people. Be there trusting that you'll learn because people will care about you. That's a really strange sounding methodology maybe [laughs].

Caro Fowler

There's a lot of truth in showing up and being a good citizen. And good work will actually come out of that, although no one tells you that.

Kirsten Scheid

Well, because the other option that I know of is a much more instrumentalist approach. You need to know all these things, x, y, and z. You need to be an expert on this. And you need to be able to talk about that. The this and that are from the dictionaries that we've housed in the libraries that we've carefully sealed, that seem fixed and frozen, that are sending you out. So I guess I'm hearing your question as a question to students positioned in places like the Clark as graduate students. It might not be answered exactly the same way. I mean, I guess I'm thinking about students who think they need to meet standards for art history: ideas of quality, ideas of legitimacy, [and] legibility that come to us through a pedigreed tradition. And I'm not quite taking that for granted. Although, I know that's how it works too at the American University of Beirut. It's the same standards (we raise them higher actually).

I think that loops us back. That is what I will say I was thinking against when I was saying [to] just go and trust, and be with people, and be with them as whole human beings because that's where art comes from. And that's how it lets us live. And just think about Middle East or Islamic art, it's always treated as a representation or reflection of something already given, and the already given thing that we already care about for Middle East and Islamic places is the politics and the military issues. It's the socio-economic crisis. Those are always front stage.

And I was lucky in that my life circumstances required me to be living in the place where I was doing field work, and I didn't even had the option to leave. I would have needed to get a grant to leave, like a writing grant to go somewhere else. So I was writing and I was doing my PhD, [and] beyond my coursework, the whole entire time I was in Beirut, and I had my entire adult life informed by living there. And that has made me constantly need to rethink everything, not just my terms for art or ways of writing. And I do think there are advantages to that,

because it shows the continual flux of things in ways that are harder to see when you compartmentalize your research space and your living space, your subject and your way of learning to write what is academia and theories. I'm going to take this other art seriously, and use that as my means rather than some theory that some French philosopher gave us. And maybe the artists read the French philosophers themselves [laughs], [inaudible] for a polarized world. But assuming that art is part of our life—that art is about the ways we imagine. It the concretizes them so that we can use that to look at other artworks, and it gives us another vocabulary. And it also, I think in the case of this work for example, challenges what curators can comfortably do. So her work doesn't enable buying the original. It actually requires curators to reproduce it. And a lot of curators aren't comfortable with that. But why are people uncomfortable with that? Well, because our regime of economic value around art, and our idea that art represents something and it's finished.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, I think that's wonderful. It's always interesting to me that you identify as an anthropologist because I think that description of allowing artworks to exist in all of their complexity, and allowing them to exist as your primary philosophical text is so important, and I think it's the crux of all art history that has really made an impact in the field. And for me, the work that's the most important and makes it the most interesting is allowing the artworks themselves to be our primary text, and then everything else comes and go, but it always comes back to the work itself.

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 Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.